

# GO HOME, STRANGER

by Charles Williams

An Original **PHANTOM** Mystery  
No. 631 Reprint

PHANTOM BOOKS

No. 631  
35 Cents  
1/6 N.Z.  
2/- AUST.

He intruded on a secret  
that only dead men knew!

# Go Home, Stranger

by

Charles Williams

1954

# Contents

[Title Page](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

# One

It took the message over a week to catch up with him because after he had finished the job in the sierra he went over into the jungles of the lower Ucayali to hunt jaguars. When he had read it he came up out of South America traveling very fast, a big, hard-shouldered young man in an ill-fitting suit, his face cooked dark by the sun and his hair badly in need of cutting. He would have had time to get a shave between planes in Miami, but he spent the time instead in a stifling telephone booth making one long-distance call after another, relentlessly shoving quarters into a slot and rasping questions over thousands of miles of wire while the cold ball of fear grew heavier inside him. On the third day after leaving the little town in the Peruvian jungle he walked up the steps of the police station in Waynesport, on the Gulf Coast of the United States.

It was a little after eight of a hot, breathless morning, and he couldn't remember when he had slept. It was the twenty-first of August, and since the tenth of the month his sister, who was Vickie Shane McHugh, the radio and television actress, had been in the Waynesport jail, charged with the murder of her husband.

The Chief wouldn't be in until around nine, the desk man said, but he led him down a dim hallway to the office of Lieutenant Wayland. The man behind the desk was big across the shoulders, with a heavy neck and a graying shock of tough, wiry hair. Sharp brown eyes sized him up as he came into the room.

He stood up and held out his hand. "Reno? Oh, yes. You talked to the Chief yesterday."

"When can I see her?" Reno asked abruptly.

Wayland sat down and bit the end off a small cigar. He leaned back in his chair. "This morning. Incidentally, how does it happen her name is Shane, if she's your sister?"

“Professional name,” Reno said impatiently. “Actually, it was our mother’s. But never mind all that. I’m still trying to find out what happened. And why you’re holding her.”

“You look tough enough to take it straight,” Wayland said, appraising him thoughtfully. “It’s simple enough. McHugh was murdered. And the evidence says she did it.”

“But she says she didn’t?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I’ll buy her, and you buy the evidence. But just what happened?”

“I guess you knew they were separated,” Wayland said. “That’s the first item.”

Reno said, “They were always separating, or separated, or making up. Living with either one of ‘em would be like trying to set up housekeeping in a revolving door. They both had more talent and temperament than they needed, but they were crazy about each other. They always made up.”

“The trial will be held in court,” Wayland said. “Not here. You want to hear what happened, or do you want to make a speech?”

Reno lit a cigarette and sat down, hunching forward in the chair. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Give me the whole story. I’ll try not to butt in.”

“It’s all right,” Wayland replied. “As you probably know by now, McHugh was down here alone, on business. Had been for five days. He was trying to run down some guy named—I’ve forgotten now, but it doesn’t matter. Anyway, to get to the night he was killed, your sister showed up unexpectedly. Didn’t wire she was coming, as far as we know now. What she keeps telling us is that she was driving from New York to the Coast, and since she knew he was down here she decided to surprise him by dropping in to see him. And apparently she did. Surprise him, I mean. They’d been separated about four months, and she’d been in some television work in New York. So she arrived at the Boardman Hotel here, where McHugh was staying, around midnight. McHugh wasn’t in his room. But while she was calling from the desk, he came in from the street. With this other girl.”

Reno’s eyes jerked upward and he stared at the Lieutenant. “So that’s the idea? You’re all wrong. I’ve known Mac all my life, and he wasn’t that kind. There hasn’t been any playing around with babes since he was married.”

Wayland shrugged. “You asked me what happened, and I’m telling you. McHugh’s wife drops in unexpectedly and finds him wandering into the hotel at midnight with a stray babe, and about an hour later McHugh is dead. Anyway, the clerk didn’t hear anything that was said, except that there didn’t appear to be any row to speak of, and the other girl shoved off. McHugh and your sister went up to his room.

“At five minutes past one, some guest of the fourteenth floor called the desk and said he’d heard something like a shot and a scream in the next room. The clerk sent the house detective up there on the double. The door was closed and locked, but he could hear something that sounded like moaning inside, so he passkeyed his way in.

“McHugh was lying on the floor and she was down beside him with his head in her arms, rocking and whimpering, and then she passed out. The detective threw a couple of sheets over them—over her because she didn’t have on enough clothes to wad a popgun, and over McHugh because he was dead.

“He called us. We had some men over there before she snapped out of it. When she did come around she was unraveling all over the place and not much of what she said made any sense. She finally calmed down enough to tell us that she’d been in the bathroom changing into a nightgown when she’d heard voices out in the room, as if somebody had come in to see McHugh. She didn’t look out, she said, because she wasn’t dressed. Then she heard the shot, and she screamed. She ran out of the bathroom, and just as she did she heard the door going out into the corridor slam shut.

“McHugh had been shot in the back of the neck, just at the base of the skull—with a twenty-five automatic, we found out as soon as we got a look at the slug. The house detective didn’t see anybody else in the corridors, and nobody came down in the elevators.”

Reno drew a hand savagely across his face and gestured as he hitched around in the chair. “But how about the gun? There must have been fingerprints on it.”

“We didn’t find the gun until after ten o’clock, and when we did there weren’t any fingerprints on it. There wasn’t much of anything on it. It was—or had been—one of those junior-miss gimcracks with pearl handles, and the pieces of it were lying beside some garbage cans in the alley next to the

hotel. The alley is paved, and it was fourteen floors down from McHugh's room. They don't make those kiss-me-quick guns for that kind of duty."

Well, I had to be sure, Reno thought, conscious of the cold void inside him. It was the same way Carstairs had said it was. It was dynamite.

Wayland was looking at him with something like regret. "I'm sorry. But you see how it is. Those hotel windows are closed all the time in summer, because the place is air-conditioned. And that one was still closed when our men got there. It would have had to be opened, the gun heaved put, and then closed again. And she says she came running out of the bathroom as soon as she heard the shot, and that the man she says was in there was already going out the door into the corridor. So, by her own story, nobody would have had time to throw that gun out except her."

"But wait a minute," Reno said, shaking his head. "Can't you see she has to be telling the truth? She's not stupid. Do you think that if she was going to lie about it she'd make up a dumb story like that?"

"Yes. I know. We've thought about that. But don't forget that your sister is high-strung and hotheaded, and that when she told us this she was just coming out of a faint and was on the edge of hysteria. She said the first thing she could think of, and afterward she had to stick to it. I've been in police work a long time, and I've never seen a woman on a rampage with a gun yet who seemed to have much logic about it."

"Then she did it, as far as you're concerned?" Reno said harshly. "You can quit looking. You've got it made."

Wayland started to make some quick retort, but checked himself. "Cool off, Reno," he said without emotion. "I know how you feel. But they don't pay me to draw conclusions, or prosecute anybody. That's up to the District Attorney. I'm just supposed to dig up the facts."

"Well, what have you dug up about this guy Mac was looking for?"

"There isn't anything there, as far as I can see. McHugh was trying to find him, and apparently didn't. People seldom get shot for that, except maybe in Russia."

Reno shook his head, dissatisfied. "It's not that simple. There's something screwy about it. In the first place, Mac wasn't a gumshoe or a skip-tracer; he was a lawyer, and a damned smart one. He wouldn't have been down here playing cops-and-robbers like some kid."

"I wouldn't know," Wayland said wearily. "All I know is that he was. Bannerman, over in Missing Persons, remembered him. McHugh came into Headquarters the first day he was in town, trying to run down this—this—Oh, what the hell was his name? Wait a minute." He paused, shuffling through the papers on his desk. "Here it is. Conway. Rupert Conway.' McHugh was trying to locate this guy—apparently for the guy's wife—but didn't have any picture of him, only a description and the dope on his car. There was one funny thing about it." Wayland stopped and frowned thoughtfully at the cigar smoke.

"What was that?" Reno asked.

"It was a goofy sort of coincidence. We had the car. Conway's car, I mean. Traffic Detail had had it in the garage for two weeks. Picked it up in a tow-away zone."

"But you don't think it had any connection with Mac's being killed?" Reno insisted.

Wayland dismissed the idea with a curt "No."

Reno was silent for a moment, moodily watching smoke drift through the shaft of sunlight slanting in through the window and falling across the desk. So this was all there was to it. This was the way it ended. The best friend he'd ever had was dead, and they could send Vickie to the penitentiary or to her death for killing him.

His face hardened with anger. Maybe they'd better think again about that. It was too simple, too pat, and somewhere the man who'd killed Mac was smiling about it. He crushed out his cigarette in a tray and stood up.

"Can I see her now?" he asked.

\* \* \*

It was a bare, harshly lighted room without windows. Reno prowled restlessly up and down, dead tired but unable to stop or sit still. At last he heard footsteps in the corridor, and turned.

The door opened and Vickie was standing in it, with the detective behind her. She was as straight and lovely as ever, even in the plain tailored suit and wearing no makeup. She was tall and strikingly blonde, with deep blue eyes that were very tired.

"Hello, Pete," she said calmly. "Have you got a cigarette?"

Maybe we all should have had dramatic training, he thought. We haven't seen each other for two years and she's in jail charged with killing Mac, so I've just been out to buy some smokes.

She stepped across the room and kissed him lightly on the cheek. They sat down across from each other at the table while the detective leaned back against the wall in a chair and watched them. Reno gave her a cigarette and held the match.

"Thanks, Pete," she said. "It's an awful home-coming for you, isn't it? I'm sorry."

They understood each other, and always had. He was four years older than she was, and there had always been something fiercely protective and very proud in his relationship with her. They had been alone since their mother had died while Vickie was still in high school, and he had sent her to college and drama school out of his earnings as a construction engineer in Arabia and Alaska and South America. Tough and hard-bitten himself, with scant social grace and little talent except for the clear-cut and hard-cornered realities of the man's world he lived in, he was intensely devoted to her—as he had been to Mac—for the qualities the two of them had in such abundance, personality and talent and a sort of heartwarming charm. And he knew her well enough to know that right now he was seeing another quality, which was bravery—or, as he would have expressed it succinctly, guts. She was 'walking very carefully along the ragged edge of horror and letting none of it show. I've got to make it as easy as I can for her, he thought; and still I've got to ask her about it.

"All right, Vick," he said gently. "Tell me."

"I think they've been reading detective stories," she said. "They're under the impression I came here to kill M-Mac." The only outward sign of what was inside her was that almost imperceptible tremor in pronouncing the name.

"I've already talked to Lieutenant Wayland," Reno said. "And to Carstairs, in San Francisco. So we can skip all the obvious stuff. What I want to know is whether Mac told you why he was down here. And did he say who that girl was?"

"He was looking for somebody. A man named—I've forgotten, Pete. He told me the man's name, but I didn't pay much attention."

“The man’s name was Conway,” Reno said. “I know that much. But did Mac say why he was doing a crazy thing like that?”

“No,” she said helplessly. “We didn’t talk about it much. I do know, though, that he had something on his mind. Oh, of course, we were both delirious about being together again and full of plans for when we got back to San Francisco, but you know how Mac is when he’s working on something—he’s all wound up in it.” She stopped suddenly and looked at him and they could both feel the horror of it, of that slip of the tongue that had referred to Mac in the present tense.

“But about the girl,” Reno cut in, to cover it. “Did he say who she was, and why she was there?”

“Yes.” She nodded, her face very white. “It was about this—what’s-his-name—Conway. She had something to tell him, or had already told him, and they were going into the hotel bar. Mac wanted to write it down.”

“Did Mac introduce you?”

“Yes.”

“What was her name?”

She stared at him and sighed. “Pete, I don’t know. Even if I had paid any attention at the time—”

“Could you describe her?”

“Pete, dear, any woman can always describe any other woman she sees with her husband. But, for the love of heaven, do we have to talk about her? That’s what the police have been harping on until I’m half crazy. She didn’t have anything to do with it. The person I heard talking to Mac while I was in the bathroom was a man.”

He shook his head. “You don’t get what I’m driving at, Vick. Of course she didn’t have anything to do with it— at least, not in the way they think. But look. Somebody killed Mac; and he didn’t have any enemies as far as either of us knows, or as far as Carstairs knows. So the only thing in God’s world we’ve got to go on is this stupid Conway deal. And she must have been mixed up in that some way. What did she look like?”

“She was about twenty-five, I should say. Very striking brunette, in summer clothes. Cottons, you know—white.”

“Never mind what she was wearing,” Reno said. “It’s been ten days, and she just might have changed into something else.”

“Oh. Well, she was about five feet six, I’d guess, good figure, dark brown eyes, jet-black hair cut short and curled close to her head, something like the poodle haircut—or did they have that in the Andes? She had a dimple in her chin, and a good sun tan. Educated, good voice very close to contralto, no Southern drawl. Poised.”

Reno nodded thoughtfully. “In other words, a dish. A girl people would notice. But why haven’t the police been able to find her?”

She sighed. “I don’t know whether the fantastic noodle-heads have even tried. Or if they have, they’ve been looking in the wrong places. Their idea is she was some floozie Mac picked up in a bar. She wasn’t, quite obviously.”

“O.K.,” Reno said, with more assurance than he felt. “It’s something to start with. But now—did you get even a glimpse of the guy? I mean, when you ran out of the bathroom?”

She shook her head wearily. “No. That’s the horrible part of it, Pete. He was right there within ten feet of me, and by the time I got out into the room he was gone. But maybe I wouldn’t have seen what he looked like, anyway. I was looking at Mac. He was crumpled, lying—” Her voice started to break up on her. She stopped and took a deep breath, looking away from him. When she turned back she had everything under control again and she went on calmly, “Mac was dead. That’s what I was trying to say.?”

“But you did hear them talking? Before, I mean?”

“Yes. But I wouldn’t recognize his voice. It was only a mumble.”

“You didn’t hear even one word that was said?”

She put both hands up alongside her face with an infinite weariness. “Pete, I’ve gone back and forth through it a thousand times. And I don’t think so. I keep having an impression I heard somebody say something that sounded like ‘counsel,’ but it could be just imagination, because Mac was an attorney.”

“But nothing else?”

“No. Not a thing. If I even heard that.”

Reno was silent for a moment. He was scared, and trying not to show it. There wasn’t anything here to go on except the thin lead of that girl, and the police hadn’t come up with her after ten days. He reached out and put a big, sunburned hand over one of hers, and as he did so he remembered the detective. He turned, and the man was watching them unwaveringly.

“What about those attorneys Carstairs arranged for you when he came down?” he asked. “Durand and Gage, isn’t it? What are they doing?”

“Being obscenely cheerful, most of the time, just like doctors. Pete, thank God you woolly-eared construction stiffs don’t have to take a course in Bubbling Optimism when you’re going to school.”

“We’ll find out who did it; Vick.”

“Is this your bedside manner?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s a hunch. There’s something about this Conway thing that smells. If I can’t tout the police onto him, I’m going to buy a piece of him myself. I want to have a nice, long talk with Mr. Conway.”

She gestured hopelessly. “But, Pete, Mac used to be in the FBI. And if he couldn’t find him—”

“Uh-uh,” Reno said. “I think that’s where everybody’s missed the boat.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mac did: But he got in front of him.”

## Two

It had sounded brave and convincing enough there at the jail while he was trying to give her something to cling to, but where did he go from here? Suppose it was Conway? And suppose Mac had found him? Everything he had learned was gone now, into the grave with Mac himself.

He had come back to the hotel, knowing he had to get some sleep before long or collapse, but it hadn't been any good. Every time his eyes closed he started seeing black headlines that screamed, "Actress Found Guilty in Slaying." He stopped his pacing up and down the room and wearily ground another cigarette into the tray.

He reached for the telephone again. Two previous attempts had been fruitless. Carstairs was in court, the girl had said.

He jiggled the hook. "Operator, will you try that call to San Francisco again? Person-to-person to Carstairs of Carstairs and McHugh. . . . Oh. Good. Yes, I'll hold on."

This time his luck was better. In a moment he heard the familiar voice on the other end. He and Carstairs and Mac had all gone to college together. "Hello, Dick?" he said. "This is Pete Reno, in Waynesport."

'Oh, Pete. I was just about to call you," Carstairs replied. "Has anything new turned up?" Carstairs had flown to Waynesport when it happened. He had arranged for attorneys for Vickie and had taken Mac's body back to San Francisco for burial after the inquest.

"No," Reno said. "Maybe they figure they've got it made. They've got her."

"Pete, we've known each other too long for me to try to kid you. They've got a case. A hell of a case. A D.A.'s dream."

"Except that she didn't do it."

"Check. But that's because we know her. They don't. All they've got is the only thing they're supposed to pay any attention to, and that's the

evidence. Motive, for one thing. And she was there in the room with him, and can't prove anybody else was.

"I know they've got a case. If they didn't, I'd get some sleep. But I called about something else."

"What?"

"Conway. We find him, we've got the guy who killed Mac."

"You've been going to movies."

"No," Reno said. "Listen. Conway didn't need looking for because he didn't know the way home. Any filling station would give him a road map. So maybe he didn't want to be found. And suppose Mac was getting too warm."

"But, dammit, Pete, Conway wasn't a gangster."

"Well, what was he?"

"Frankly, you've got me there. I never met him. But I know his wife, and she's no gun moll. Very wealthy, in a quiet sort of way, cultured, old California family—that sort of thing."

"I'm not talking about Conway's wife. Maybe she was Joan of Arc, or Little Bo Peep. I'm talking about Conway himself. What do you know about him?"

"Well," Carstairs said hesitantly, "not too much. They'd been married only a few months, I understand. He was her second husband."

"All right. But just why was Mac looking for him?"

"Because she was paying us."

"I thought you guys were running a law office. When'd you go into the keyhole and dictaphone business?"

"We didn't. This was a sort of special deal. You see, she knew Mac had been in the FBI and was a trained bloodhound, and she insisted. We'd done quite a bit of legal work for her and hoped to do more in the future, and as I say, she's well to do. You just don't brush off that kind when you're trying to build up a legal practice."

"Why didn't she go to the police?"

"Well, there could be a number of reasons for that. A desire to avoid publicity and embarrassment, for one thing. She's a shy type. Maybe she just didn't want to face them, and the inference they would draw—that her husband was running out on her."

"You think that's all?" Reno asked, conscious of bitter disappointment.

“Actually, I couldn’t say. You see, Mac handled the whole thing. But wouldn’t that be your guess?”

“I suppose so,” Reno said wearily. “But listen, Dick. I’ve got to have something to start with. I’ll go off my rocker, just sitting around here, and Conway’s the only thing I’ve got. So will you get hold of her and see what you can find out? I mean, any reports Mac might have sent her . . .”

“She wouldn’t go for that,” Carstairs protested. “I mean, the thing was confidential, or she wouldn’t have come to us in the first place.”

“But for God’s sake, Dick, will you try?” Reno said desperately. “Ask her. Get a description. Find out why Mac was looking in Waynesport, of all places, Find out anything you can. And any way you can. Tell her I’ll try to find Conway for her.”

“All right, Pete, I’ll try. But I can’t promise anything.”

“Good. Now you’re talking. Call back in an hour. Boardman Hotel.”

“Roger.”

It was the longest hour of his life, sitting there staring at the telephone, and when it did ring at last he looked at his watch and noted, without believing it, that it hadn’t been an hour at all. It had been twenty minutes.

“San Francisco is calling,” the operator said. “Go ahead, please.”

“Yes,” he said, prodded with impatience. “Yes. Dick? Is that you?”

“Carstairs here,” the voice said on the other end of the line. “Pete, I’m afraid I’ve got bad news for you.”

“What’s that?” Reno barked.

“Mrs. Conway. She’s disappeared.”

“What!”

“She’s left town. And the manager of the apartment house says she didn’t leave any word as to where she was going or how long she’d be gone.”

He could feel the hope ooze out of him. He sat down on the side of the bed. “Oh, no,” he said.

After he had hung up he sat for a long time staring dumbly out the window. They’d had one thin lead to work on, and now that was gone. The police hadn’t been able to find that girl in ten days, and now the only other person in the world who apparently knew anything about Conway had evaporated along with her. It was like chasing ghosts.

When he couldn't stand the room any longer, he went out and wandered aimlessly through sun-blasted streets and then sat for an indefinite period of time he couldn't even remember in the inviting dimness of a bar over a Scotch he forgot to drink. He was seized with a helplessness he had never known before. If there were only something he could get his hands on. All his life he had gone at everything by frontal assault, but there was nothing to attack here, no place even to start. It was terrifying. The only thing between Vickie and disaster was a fantastic story a prosecutor would tear to shreds.

He shoved back the untouched drink and stalked over to the telephone booth.

\* \* \*

Howell Gage, of Durand and Gage, was a rail-thin young man in his early thirties, abrupt, bony-faced, and full of an explosive nervous energy that defied the heat. His blue eyes reflected the quick and lunging intelligence that sometimes outran his tongue.

"Get it, Reno," he burst out, shoving up from his chair behind the big desk to go striding across the office. "There's self-defense. There's temporary insanity. There's the outright accident—I didn't intend to do it, I didn't know the gun was loaded.' There's the struggle for the gun. Good God, man, there's everything, the world's full of 'em, of ways we could get the charge reduced, or get a light sentence, or get an acquittal. But listen." He whirled, jerked a hand through the bristling red hair, and jabbed it at Pete Reno. "We can't. You see the gruesome joke of it? The irony? It's maddening. We can't—because she didn't kill him. That stupid story of hers is true. I'd bet my life on it. So what can we do? We walk right into the meat chopper. We go into court and plead not guilty to murder in the first degree, the way the charge stands now, with nothing but that crazy story to back us up. And they'll clobber us. I haven't told your sister; she's got enough to handle now."

"But wait," Reno said desperately. "You believe it. I believe it. Why not the jury? Anybody could see that if she was going to make up a story she wouldn't have made up that one."

Gage broke in on him. "A small-town jury? Packed with Solid Burghers and Mrs. Solid Burghers? Who've all been married twenty years or more? Look, Reno. She was separated from her husband. Sinful! She was an actress. Hmmmph! Wait'll the D.A. Gets through with that. The lousy ham—I can see him already, the barefoot boy drawing the mantle of all the homespun virtues about himself to denounce the big-city Jezebel, the shameless hussy who should have been home darning her husband's socks instead of gallivanting around the country play-acting and spying on him. And shooting him. And throwing the gun out the window."

"She didn't throw the gun out of any window," Reno said. "She didn't have a gun."

Gage came back and perched on the side of the desk. He took out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Reno. "But the gun was found in the alley, fourteen floors below the window, smashed all to hell."

Reno gestured impatiently. "It could have been put there by whoever killed Mac."

Gage pointed the cigarette at him. "Right. But let me show you how it works. And duck, because you're going to have egg on your face. You're Vickie Shane. I'm the District Attorney. Now, my dear Miss Shane, you say the gun could have been placed there by the murderer. Good. But just how do you account for the fact that it was broken, as if it had fallen from some great height—say, oddly enough, fourteen floors?"

"That's easy," Reno said. "The murderer merely slammed it down against the pavement to make it look as if it had fallen that far."

"But why, Miss Shane? Why? Doesn't that strike you as an odd pastime for a man who's just killed another man? A compulsion, perhaps? An irresistible urge to go around throwing guns down against paving stones so they'd break?"

"It'd be obvious to any moron," Reno said, "that he did it to frame her. He knew she was in the room."

"Oh." Gage smiled coldly, and then pounced. "He knew you were in the room? So this mental case, this utter idiot, went up to a hotel room where he knew there were two people, with the intention of murdering one of them and leaving the other for a witness? Come, Miss Shane, you don't expect us to believe that? These are all mature, intelligent men and women in this jury box."

“But, damn it,” Reno burst out, “he didn’t know Vickie was in the room until she screamed.”

“So!” Gage exclaimed triumphantly. “That explains everything, doesn’t it? Surprised in the act of murder, with a loaded gun in his hand, this man merely went on out and closed the door, leaving behind a living witness to his crime, when he could have killed you with just one more shot, which wouldn’t have taken a tenth of a second. He had no way of knowing you hadn’t seen his face before you screamed. You might send him to the death house. But still he went off and left you there, and just contented himself with some asinine and childish prank like throwing the gun against the paving under your window. Miss Shane, I must warn you that you’re trying our patience.”

“It has to be that way,” Reno said. “That’s what actually happened, so there must be a way of explaining it. Maybe he lost his nerve. Maybe he panicked and ran.”

Gage shook his head. He was himself again, already bored with being the District Attorney. “No. You’ve got the right idea, but you’re off the track. It’s simpler than that. There was a very good reason he didn’t kill her, but we can’t prove one damned word of it.” ,

“Well, good God,” Reno said furiously. “Don’t just stand there. What was it?”

“Inertia.”

“What?”

“Lag. Interval. Reflex time. Whatever you want to call it,” Gage explained impatiently, in staccato outbursts. “You remember what happened when the house detective went up there? The door was locked. It’s a spring lock, like all hotel doors. And remember what she said? She screamed, and then almost at the same time she heard the door close. Get it now?”

“Yes,” Reno said excitedly. “Yeah. I see it now.”

“Exactly. He was going out the door when she cut loose. And in that infinitesimal fraction of a second it took him to realize there was somebody else in the room, he couldn’t stop himself, and had pulled the door shut. And he couldn’t get back in. If she’d screamed a tenth of a second earlier, your sister wouldn’t be charged with murder. She’d be dead.”

“Well, that does it,” Reno said, rising from his chair in his eagerness. “They’ll have to believe it.”

Gage sat down behind the desk again and shook his head. "I hate to tell you this, Reno," he said, "but they won't believe a word of it."

"They have to!"

"I'm sorry. It's conjecture, pure and simple. Courts deal in evidence, and there's not the slightest bit of proof there was ever anybody except your sister in that room."

He went back to the hotel at last because there wasn't anywhere else to go, and as he approached the doors he noted absently that the airport limousine was discharging passengers under the marquee.

Two or three guests were checking in at the desk. He got his key and had started to turn away when something the clerk said arrested him with the suddenness of a gunshot. It was a name.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Conway. We have your reservation."

He stopped dead still, and then took out a cigarette and carefully lighted it as he let his face swing back toward the desk. She was a very pretty woman in her early thirties, a little over average height and very smartly and expensively turned out in a suit that was out of place in this climate. San Francisco? He wondered. She had the look. But hell, the world was full of Conways.

She was reaching for the registration card the clerk had pushed across the desk. Reno walked slowly over to the sand-filled urn beyond her, dropped the match in it, and as he turned back let his gaze sweep across the card. Excitement whispered along his nerves.

"Mrs. Rupert Conway," it said. "San Francisco."

He stepped over to the newsstand adjoining the desk. Picking up a magazine, he started leafing idly through it while he strained his ears to catch the clerk's voice. He heard the tinkle of the bell. And then it came.

"Mrs. Conway to Twelve-o-six."

He heard the boy gathering up the bags and the sound of their footsteps retreating toward the elevators. Dropping a quarter on the glass to pay for the magazine, he turned and picked them out of the drifting throngs in the lobby. There was no one with her except the bellboy.

The boy came down in a few minutes and he strolled leisurely into the elevator, hiding his impatience. She'd be alone now. "Twelve," he said. They went up, and when he got out and walked along the silent corridor looking at numbers, he was conscious of the excitement again and the

feeling he was getting close to something. Why had she come? Was she still looking for Conway? Suppose she won't talk? He thought. He wished he had Mac's personality and gift of gab. He was too abrupt and blunt himself for anything requiring finesse.

He knocked at 1206, and wondered if he should try to get his foot in the door. He'd have to talk fast. He heard her moving around inside, and then the door opened a crack and he could see the big violet eyes, a little apprehensive as they peered out at him.

"Mrs. Conway?" he asked quickly. "I wonder if I could talk to you a minute. I'm—"

He didn't have a chance to finish. To his amazement she pulled the door back. "Yes," she said urgently. "Yes. Come in."

When he was inside she closed the door and turned to face him, obviously under intense strain and trying to control herself. "How did you know I was here?" she asked. "I just this minute—"

"I was down at the desk when you checked in," he said, puzzled. Who did she think he was? Getting in had been too easy.

"Please," she said hurriedly, not even listening. "What do you know about my husband?"

Reno studied her face. The large eyes were imploring, and yet they were worried and frightened. She's looking for something, he thought, that she's afraid she's not going to like when she finds it.

"I don't know anything about your husband," he said, as gently as he could. "That's what I came here to ask you."

She stepped back as if he had slapped her. "But—I don't understand. You called me. Long-distance. You said—"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't call you. Maybe I'd better introduce myself. My name's Reno."

"Oh," she said. The eyes were, full of confusion. "I thought you were somebody else. I don't think I know anyone named Reno, do I?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "But I'm a friend of somebody you do know. A dead man by the name of McHugh."

She stared at him almost without comprehension at first, and then he could see the fear and shock come into her face. "Oh," she said. "Oh." Then she sat down.



## Three

For a moment neither of them said anything. The silence seemed to stretch out, and he could hear the faint hum of traffic far below. He took out a pack of cigarettes and offered her one. She thanked him in a strained voice. He lit it, and another for himself, and looked about for a chair. The room, he noticed now for the first time, was the living room of a suite.

He studied her as he sat down and tossed the match into a tray on the coffee table. Although tall, she was nevertheless graceful in all her movements, and had one of the most hauntingly lovely faces he had ever seen. With the long-lashed violet eyes and raven blackness of hair, it was an odd combination of bold coloration and contrastingly gentle, almost melancholy shyness of expression. As he glanced down at the hands in her lap endlessly pleating and unpleating a fold of her skirt, he was aware of the agitation she was trying not to show.

"It was such a terrible thing about Mr. McHugh," she said at last.

"Yes," he said. He leaned forward a little. "Mrs. Conway, why was Mac looking for your husband?"

He knew instantly he had been too precipitate. She was shy and bewildered, and he had hit her too suddenly with it.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reno, but it was confidential."

He drew a hand wearily across his face and got up to walk over and stand looking out the window. For a moment he was conscious of wondering whether he might not lose his mind in this frustrating chase after a phantom named Conway. Maybe he was already mad, and there wasn't any Conway at all. When he turned back, he asked, "You know Dick Carstairs, don't you?"

"Why, yes," she said, puzzled. "Why?"

"Well, let me get him on the phone. I'll pay for the call. He'll tell you who I am, and he'll vouch for the fact that I'm no gossiping windbag trying to

pry into your affairs out of curiosity. McHugh was the best friend I ever had, and they're trying to convict my sister of killing him."

"Your sister?" she interrupted, staring at him. "You mean Vickie Shane?"

"Yes," Reno said. "Do you know her?"

"Not very well, though Mr. McHugh introduced us once. But I'm a great admirer of hers."

"I wish you'd tell me about it. I mean, why Mac was down here, and what he found out, if anything."

"But it couldn't have had anything at all to do with his being killed," she protested.

"Maybe it didn't, Mrs. Conway," he said desperately. "But don't you see, I have to start somewhere. I'm grabbing at anything I can see."

"All right," she said quietly. "It can't do any harm, and maybe I owe it to Mr. McHugh."

Reno came over and sat down across from her. "First," he said, "you mentioned that someone called you by long-distance. Do you know who it was?"

She shook her head. "He wouldn't give his name."

"What did he say?"

"Just that if I'd come down here he could tell me something about my husband."

"Didn't you think that was a little funny?"

"Of course." Then she added quietly, "I was desperate, Mr. Reno. I still am."

She's taking a beating, he thought. He was beginning to like her. There was unmistakable sincerity in the concern she felt for Mac's death and the jam Vickie was in.

"All right," he said. "Now, why was Mac looking for him? And in Waynesport?"

"Because Mr. Conway had disappeared. And Waynesport is the last place I heard from him. It was a little over a month ago, around the middle of July. He had to come down here on business, he said, and he drove the car. I tried to get him to fly, as it would take less time, but he said he would need the car here."

"You say you heard from him? After he left San Francisco?"

She nodded unhappily. "Yes. I received a letter from him every day until he reached here. He wrote me the night he arrived, just a short note saying he would write again the next morning." She stopped suddenly, her voice breaking. Then she recovered herself, and went on. "That was the last word I ever received from him. He hadn't given me any address, and I didn't know what to do. When two weeks had gone by I was frantic. I flew down here.

"It was terrifying. I was utterly helpless. Waynesport is a city of over a hundred thousand, and I had absolutely nowhere to start. I understood his family had lived here—that is, he and his mother—and that he still owned some property she had left him. There were several Conways in the telephone book and I visited them, but not one of them had ever heard of my husband. In three days I had to give up and go back. That was when I thought of Mr. McHugh. It took me some time to persuade him, but when he finally realized how frantic I was, he said he would help me."

Reno sat staring moodily at the cigarette in his hand. All right, he thought, so she doesn't want to talk. She's not lying—I doubt she'd know how—but she's just not telling me. Looking in the phone book for a man who's disappeared! And yet she's terrified that something's happened to him.

He shook his head and looked directly into her eyes. "It doesn't jell, Mrs. Conway. I know you don't have to tell me if you don't want to but you haven't explained anything. Just why did you hire Mac instead of going to the police?"

She started to take offense. He could see her drawing herself up, and then she broke completely. The utter helplessness of her crying wasn't pleasant to hear. He waited uncomfortably, feeling sorry for her and regretting his bluntness. She's nice, he thought. Yeah, and so was Mac.

When the sobbing had subsided and she looked up at him, tear-streaked and forlorn, he leaned over and held out his handkerchief. She shook her head mutely and got up to disappear into the bedroom. In a few minutes she returned with her face repaired with new makeup.

"I'm sorry," he said, standing up.

"It's all right." She sat down and took the cigarette he offered. "You were right, I suppose. I didn't tell you all of it. But it was just that I didn't think I could make you understand. It would be hard for a man to see."

“You could try me,” he said. He could see a little of it already. She was very much in love with Conway and at the same time she was afraid there was something wrong about him. Maybe he was mixed up in something he shouldn’t be, but it didn’t make any difference. She wanted him back. And she was scared. What was it she was afraid she’d find? The police? Another woman? “Tell me,” he prompted. “Did Mac find out anything after he got down here?”

“A little,” she said quietly. “And it scared me more.”

“All right. Suppose you go back to the beginning and tell me everything.”

“Very well,” she said. Her face was very still and she was looking past him at nothing. “I may not be able to make you understand, though. You may not know what it is to be terribly lonely, or afraid of something you can’t even name. Maybe you never had a dreadful feeling about a place.”

“A place?”

She nodded somberly. “I know it sounds silly. But it’s there. I can’t-help it. It’s Waynesport. It’s an awful feeling there’s some connection between my husband and this place, something I can’t understand. I don’t know how to explain it. Maybe it was his forever poring over the newspaper from down here. He bought it at the newsstand every day—”

“Just a minute,” Reno interrupted. “You say he bought the paper, or one of the papers, every day? Wasn’t it two or three days old by the time he got it?”

“Yes. But that didn’t make any difference. He always read it, very thoroughly, as if he were looking for something. And when we first met—”

“When was that?”

“This spring. In Italy. In Naples, to be exact. We were attracted to each other from the start, partly because of a mutual interest in music and art, and partly because we both loved the country. He had lived in Italy for several years when he was a child, and later, after college, and of course he spoke the language fluently. He showed me a lot of the country I probably wouldn’t have seen or understood alone, and the night before he was supposed to sail for the States he asked me to marry him. I didn’t give him any definite answer, because it had been such a short time, but I did try to get him to delay his sailing and fly back from Paris with me a couple of

weeks later. He had passage booked on some small freight-and-passenger ship sailing from Genoa for the Gulf Coast.”

Reno glanced up quickly. “Waynesport?”

She nodded.

“And he wouldn’t change his mind?”

“No. That’s the reason I’m telling you this. I’m trying to explain that feeling. I pointed out that he would get back just as soon if he waited and flew, as it was a slow ship, but he insisted he had to go. At the time I thought perhaps he didn’t have much money, and couldn’t afford it. But, as it turned out, he must have had some other reason, for when he came on out to San Francisco and we continued seeing each other and later were married, in May, he apparently had no money worries.”

“And you don’t know anything about his business at all?”

“No. He never talked about money. I gathered from a few things he let drop that his mother had left him some property in the South, and I had the impression it was in Waynesport. But, Mr. Reno, nobody down here had ever heard of him!”

“Well,” Reno said soothingly, “as you said, it’s a large place. But tell me—and this may be a little personal, but I wish you’d answer it anyway—when he left, you hadn’t had a quarrel?”

She shook her head emphatically. “Heavens, no. In fact, I begged him to let me go too. But he said he’d be busy all the time, and that it was awfully hot down here in summer. We had never quarreled. He was a little moody and preoccupied that day, after he read the paper, but he was always very kind and considerate.”

“You mean the Waynesport paper?”

“Yes. *The Express*. He—”

“Excuse me. I’m sorry to interrupt so much, Mrs. Conway. But it was after he read the paper that he told you he was coming down here?”

“Yes. He had just come in from the street with it and was reading it in the living room. I was in another room and thought I heard him say something and went to the door to see if he had spoken to me. But he was so deeply engrossed in what he was reading he didn’t notice me. All the rest of the day he was very absent-minded, and that night he said he’d have to go to Waynesport.”

“Do you still have the paper?”

“No. I’m sorry. Mr. McHugh also asked for it, but it had been thrown away.”

“Do you remember the date of it?”

“I’m not sure, exactly. But it must have been July twelfth. As you say, it was always two or three days old when he got it, and he left San Francisco the next morning, which was the sixteenth.”

“And the last letter you received from him was mailed in Waynesport four or five days later?”

“Yes. On the twentieth.”

A little over a month ago, Reno thought. And for nearly all that time his car was in a police garage. Something either happened to him, or he was doing a deliberate runout on her. But why did he keep writing until he got here if he intended to fade? It didn’t make sense. He got up and prowled around restlessly.

“All right, Mrs. Conway,” he said. “Can you tell me what you heard from McHugh from the time he got here?”

“Just a minute, please.” She went out into the bedroom. In a minute she came back carrying two thick envelopes and a telegram. “This is all of it,” she said, “except one long-distance telephone call. The phone call was last, and the strangest of all, and it made me think that maybe he had found something.” She was quiet for a moment as she sat down and Reno could see she was trying not to break down and cry again. “But I’ll give them to you in order. The first was the telegram.”

Reno reached for it and unfolded the yellow sheet. “Please advise if car had trailer hitch,” it said. “McHugh.”

She shook her head at his questioning look. “I didn’t understand it either, at the time. If he thought he had located the car, he had the license number and motor number.”

“No,” Reno said. “He wasn’t trying to identify the car. But was there a hitch on it?”

“Not when it left San Francisco.”

Reno nodded. “That was what Mac wanted to know. So there was one on it when he located it. Did he find the trailer?”

“That was another strange thing,” she said. “It wasn’t a trailer.”



## Four

He stared at her, incredulous and puzzled, and had just opened his mouth to speak when the telephone rang in the bedroom. "Excuse me," she said, and arose.

He eyed the two envelopes hungrily, and then shrugged. He could wait until she returned. Another minute or two wouldn't make any difference, and he had to be careful about rushing her. But what on earth had she meant by saying it wasn't a trailer? There was one other 'possibility, of course, but that didn't make sense either.

Suddenly he was conscious that he could hear her in the other room. "Yes. Yes. I understand," she was saying in a low voice charged with emotion. "Of course not, if you say so. No one. No one at all.... Where?... Counsel Bayou? And then turn—I'll find it."

He heard the telephone drop into the cradle, and she appeared in the doorway. Her eyes avoided his.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reno," she said awkwardly, "but I'll have to ask you to leave."

"But Mac's reports—"

"I've changed my mind. It was foolish to think I could let anyone read them."

"But you can't do that! I've got to see them."

"Please," she said, almost tearfully, her voice beginning to be a little wild. "Will you go? I—I can't talk about it any more."

He stood up. He was beginning to understand now. "So he called you again?"

She made no answer, but her eyes begged him to get out. He thought bitterly of the two reports lying there on the table, but there was nothing he could do now.

"All right," he said, then paused with his hand on the door. "But there are a couple of things I've got to tell you. One of them is that your friend on

the phone sounds like a bad check to me, and you'd better take a good look at anything he sells you.

"The other one is that I'm still looking for the joker in this deal. And if I find it, things are going to get rugged."

He was still burning with anger and disappointment as he went down in the elevator. In another five minutes he'd have learned what Mac had found out. Well, it couldn't be helped now. The man who had called her had warned her to talk to no one; that was obvious. And he'd told her where to meet him.

He was crossing the lobby when the idea struck him. He stopped and considered it, his eyes growing hard, and turned and headed for the telephone booths. The caller claimed to know something about Conway. Maybe, then, if Mrs. Conway would lead the way out there . . .

He looked up U-Drive agencies in the book and hurried over to the nearest one. After he had rented a car and secured a road map, he had to circle the block five or six times before a parking place opened up where he could watch the hotel entrance. He slid into it, put a nickel in the meter, and settled down to wait. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter of five.

Sunlight tilted brazenly into the street, and the glare hurt his eyes. Fifteen minutes dragged by. Maybe he had missed her. He got the road map out of the glove compartment and studied it between glances at the hotel doors. Counsel Bayou was about thirty-five miles to the southeast, one of the myriad waterways intersecting the main ship channel on its meandering way to the Gulf.

He glanced up suddenly. A car was pulling into the hotel loading zone, a gray Cadillac with California license plates. That would be Conway's car. He saw the white-coated garage attendant get out, and Mrs. Conway came out of the hotel.

He slid in behind the big car as it pulled out of the zone. Keeping well closed up, he followed her through the downtown traffic, and when they were on the open highway he fell back about a quarter mile, allowing two or three cars to get between them. The sun was setting now, and shadows were thickening in the moss-hung labyrinths of the live oaks on both sides of the road. Farmhouses were farther apart as they wound on into the bayou country.

As he watched the cars ahead he wondered suddenly and angrily if all this had anything to do with Vickie. Maybe he was just wasting time. But why, in the name of heaven, would a man who was trying to disappear announce where he was going, write a letter every day until he got there, and leave his car on the street to be picked up by the police?

He shook his head impatiently. The whole thing was crazy. What about the trailer hitch? If it hadn't been a trailer Conway was pulling when he got here, it had to be a boat. But why? Was he going fishing? That was stupid; there were hundreds of places all over this bayou country that rented boats to fishermen. Not even an idiot would spend from three to five hundred dollars for a boat-and-trailer rig and go dragging it across the continent for a couple of days' fishing when he could rent one.

And, he thought angrily, as he kept his distance behind the big car ahead, whoever had killed Mac had been no idiot. He had covered himself too beautifully; and Mac was nobody's pushover, to begin with. He slowed abruptly. Up ahead in the gathering dusk the Cadillac had swung off the highway onto a shell-surfaced road leading south through the trees. Then he noticed with surprise that one of the cars between them was turning also. Was somebody else following her? Probably just a coincidence, he thought; if he was tailing her too, he'd be back here jockeying for third place with me.

He remembered, from his study of the road map, that the ship channel should be somewhere ahead in the direction they were going now. The highway roughly paralleled it, on the north side. Suddenly they were upon it. He came around a turn in the road and found the other two cars stopped at the approach to a big steel bridge showing ghostly in the twilight. The span was lifting, and a deep-laden tanker was easing slowly down the channel, its running lights glowing brightly against the dark walls of timber.

He stopped, grateful for the car between them. The tanker passed, a muted rumble of Diesels coming up through the ventilators, and the span started swinging down. About a mile farther along the middle car turned off onto a dirt road. And then she switched on her lights. It was going to be difficult from here on. In another few minutes at most he'd have to turn on his own, and she couldn't help knowing there was a car behind her.

The country was changing now. They were running out of the timber into a flat marshland covered with cattails and high grass and crisscrossed

with canals. He saw her lights swing sharply in a right-angled turn, and they were running directly into the fading afterglow of the sunset. It was a forbidding landscape. The dark plain swept away toward the horizon to the south and west as far as the eye could reach, the monotonous marsh growth shadowy and inhospitable in the gathering night. No habitation was visible anywhere, nothing but the road running ahead.

The warning began to sound suddenly in his mind. If this was actually where her caller had told her to come, it was beginning to smell.

He thought swiftly. He could speed up and pass her, force her to stop. Maybe he could talk her out of it. But, hell, he thought angrily, that would ruin everything. He's down here somewhere, and if I make her turn back I may never find him or get another chance. I'm not her mother; she's old enough to know what she's doing.

It was too good, and he knew it. He couldn't let her do it. He cursed, flipped on the headlights, and hit the throttle. Then he saw the lights ahead of him swing sharp left as the road turned south again, deeper into the vast solitude.

The walls of grass flew back toward him and disappeared into the darkness behind. Wooden bridge boards clattered. He reached the turn, and when he was around it, skidding and throwing shell, he saw she was farther ahead. He swore again. She had seen his lights come on, and she was trying to run away from him. He ground on the throttle again. And then he saw it happen. It was sickening.

Her headlights slued crazily and then swung, tilted against the sky, as the car went out of control, skidded, and went over. For one terrible part of a second they were at right angles to the road, shattering light against the wall of grass, then they disappeared as if the car had been swallowed, instantly and entirely, by some huge monster of the swamp. There was no sound at all, not yet; nothing but the awful evidence of the lights and then the end of them, as he hit the brakes with pure reflex and began fighting his speed down just inside the margin of control. There was no time to wonder what had happened, until the sound did reach him, and then he knew. In the second before he heard the crash, he heard the other thing. It was a gun.

His car was skidding now. The rear wheels were yawing toward the ditch. He eased the brake and fought it back onto the crown of the road, and when he straightened out again he was almost on the spot. There was no

Cadillac in his lights. He could see the road, and it wasn't there. There was a canal, and a wooden bridge with one railing, and that was all he saw before he slashed down with one hand at the light switch, set the hand brake, and was out and running even before the car had shuddered to a stop.

Darkness swallowed him. He ran bent over to keep from silhouetting himself against the-sky, and he could see nothing except the faintly luminous shell of the road. Then he felt the bridge flooring under his feet, and stopped. There was dead silence now except the pounding of his heart and the suck and slap of water as the wave the Cadillac had set up died away in the pads and grass farther along the bank of the canal. It was the left-hand railing that had been ripped off, and even as he jumped he could make out the dark shape of something that could be part of the car sticking out of the water.

The water came up to his shoulders, and he could feel mud suck at his feet as he threshed his way forward, groping for the car. It couldn't make any difference, he thought bitterly; she's dead anyway. Then his hand hit something. It was a tire. He raised his head and could make out all four of them, just sticking above the surface. The car was lying on its top. He went under, groping frenziedly along the side. His arm brushed broken glass, and he felt the pain of a bad cut. The door handle had to be just above that glass somewhere. Then he felt it. He pulled. It was jammed.

The other door, he thought furiously. God, how long had it been now? As he floundered around the end of the car and down on the other side, some part of his mind was still trying to guess what the man with the gun was doing. Where was he now?

The water was deeper here. He took a quick breath and went under. It took only a second to locate the door handle. He unlatched it and pulled, feeling the terrible need to hurry run through him like physical pain. It was stuck. He set his feet against the side and heaved, fighting it. The door moved a scant inch and stopped. He pulled himself down to his knees and felt along the doorframe, and then he knew what it was. The top of the car had settled so far into the mud that the only way the door could be opened would be to dig enough of the muck from in front of it to allow it to swing. And long before he could do that she would be dead, if she weren't already.

Then he felt a surge of hope. The window was rolled down. There was opening enough for him to slide through by keeping his stomach flat against

the mud. He was pulling himself down when he felt the car shift a little and settle again. He fought down the whisperings of panic. Was it worth it, for a woman who was probably already dead? If the car rolled now, or sank a little deeper into the mud, he'd never get out.

Then, for the first time, he became conscious of the sound. It was a spasmodic thumping somewhere inside, a sound that could be made by the unconscious and futile threshings of someone drowning. There was no help for it. He had to try.

He was halfway in now. For the first time he realized he should have returned to the surface for another breath before attempting it. How long had he been under now? Twenty seconds? Thirty? His lungs were beginning to hurt. Soft mud sucked at him, while the window frame brushed ominously against his back. He felt the car slip again. He threw his arms about wildly, felt his hand touch something, and grabbed.

It was an arm. He slid his hands along it and caught her shoulders. She was struggling weakly, and one of her hands fastened itself in his clothing. He began inching backward, pulling her down toward the window. The car shuddered and settled another fraction of an inch and he fought back panic. His lungs were tortured; he had only a few seconds more. Then he was outside, pulling her body through the window. He put his feet against the muddy bottom of the canal and pushed upward, still holding her by the shoulders. Their heads came clear of the surface with a little swirling and splashing of water, and almost instantly the night erupted with the wicked crash of the gun.

He felt rather than heard the impact as lead slammed into the water a few feet off to his left. It was too dark now to see anything at all; the man was shooting at the noise they had made in surfacing. Standing perfectly still, up to his chin in water, Reno heard the metallic *clack, clack* as he operated the bolt and knew the man was shooting a rifle. The gun crashed again and lead ricocheted off the surface of the water to go screaming into the night. Reno sucked in a deep breath and was just going under when a brilliant shaft of light suddenly burst out across the surface of the canal.

His mind was clear now, and he was full of a cold and terrible rage. He was down on the mud at the bottom of the canal, against the side of the car, holding the inert figure of the woman in his left arm. She had ceased struggling, and every passing second robbed her of a little more of her

dwindling chance for life. He had to get her out of there within a minute or two and start applying artificial respiration to save her, even if she hadn't been hit by that first shot that had made her lose control of the car. Aside from the natural desire to save her if he could, he knew now that Conway was somehow the answer to the whole question and that if she died he might never know what it was. His only lead would be gone forever.

He coldly assayed their chances as he pulled his way around the end of the car. The man probably hadn't seen them. The first stab of light had hit a little farther up the canal and had started sweeping toward them just as he went under. Could he make it to the bridge before he had to surface? He was around the car now, kicking along the bottom. But which way was the bridge? When he lost contact with the car all sense of direction was gone.

His lungs were beginning to sting again. Any second now he had to come up. Then he felt grass stems raking along his face, and the slimy stems of pads. If the light's over here; he thought, we're dead. He'll see them moving. The bottom shelved upward against his shoulder, and he felt his face break out into the air. He was against one of the banks of the canal.

He opened his eyes, and through the tangled screen of grass about his face he could see the light. It was playing steadily on the upturned running gear of the car, and it was coming from this same side of the canal. The man was standing some fifteen yards away in the tall reeds along the bank.

Reno lay on his left side, completely submerged except for the upper part of his face, with Mrs. Conway in his arms in front of him. He wondered desperately if there was still any hope.

Moving with infinite caution, so as not to disturb the surface of the water, he slid a hand upward and touched the fingers against her throat. He could feel the pulse. It was pitifully weak and faltering, but her heart was beating. She was dying of oxygen starvation, but her life could still be saved. If only they could get out of the water! He stared at the light with an implacable hatred. He thought of Mac, and of Vickie, and of Mrs. Conway now, and wanted to stand up and charge straight into that beam of light and get his hands on the man who held it.

Yeah, straight into the meat-chopper, he thought coldly, getting hold of himself. That flashlight was being held along the underside of a rifle barrel, and He would be dead before he could sit up. He jerked his eyes a little, without moving his head. The light was moving now. It swept slowly along

the opposite bank of the canal, searching every inch of the vegetation. It went beyond, out of range of his eyes as he held his face rigidly still. It would be probing the dark recesses under the bridge behind them. Then it would come back, along this side.

It was full on them. He was staring straight into the blinding intensity of it, not moving, not daring even to close his eyelids or breathe, his fingers still against the throat and the weakening pulse of the woman in his arm. It was all the staring eyes in the world suddenly concentrated into one, probing into him, literally burning him out of hiding. An age seemed to pass while he waited for the sound of the shot, knowing he would never hear it if it came. Then suddenly the light was gone.

It jerked around and the rifle cracked, all at once. It was the car that drew it. Reno watched,, fascinated. It was turning. The wheels swung up and over and the whole thing sank out of sight as it settled into the deeper water in the middle of the canal. Two or three big air bubbles came up and burst on the surface and a few drops of gasoline spread a sheen of expanding color. The light remained fixed for what seemed like an eternity as the man watched the surface. Reno heard him laugh softly.

Then he was going away. He was pushing through the reeds and cattails, swinging the light ahead of him. Reno waited, fighting down the yearning to go after him. There'll be another time, he thought coldly. He made himself lie still. In another minute he heard the sound of the man's stepping into a boat and the popping roar of an outboard motor. He was headed away from them.

Reno pushed himself up and rose unsteadily from the water, listening to the dying sound of the boat. This is one time, pal, he thought, when you should have checked your figures.

## Five

He never did know how long he fought for her life there on the canal bank in the darkness. Water ran out of her clothes and mosquitoes buzzed about her face in ravenous swarms. He crouched astride her as she lay with her face slightly downhill and went on alternately pushing in against her ribs and letting them swell outward, hoping in an agony of suspense for some sign of life.

It might have been three minutes, or it might have been twenty, before he felt her quiver and heard a shuddering intake of breath as she caught the rhythm of it and her lungs began functioning again. She retched, and was sick.

In a moment she was able to sit up very weakly in his arms, and he picked her up and hurried back to the car. He put her in the front seat and climbed in behind the wheel. Their sodden clothing leaked onto the floor mat and the upholstery. He seesawed savagely back and forth across the road, turning around; then he was gunning the car in second gear to pick up speed back the way they had come. I don't even know whether she's been shot, he thought. But it wouldn't do any good to waste time trying to find out. The thing to do was to get her to a doctor.

He found one, in a combined office and residence, as they were coming into the outskirts of the city. Lifting her out, he carried her across the lawn and punched imperiously at the bell. Shoving past the startled physician, who had been interrupted at dinner, he put her down on the table in the consultation room.

"Wreck," he said shortly. "She went into a canal with her car."

She was trying to sit up now. "I'm all right," she said shakily. She was very pale, and the dark hair was plastered wetly about her face.

Reno gently shoved her back. "Take it easy," he said. "You've had enough." Then he looked down at the leaking ruin of his clothing and the

cut on his arm, which was dripping onto the rug. "Which way's the bathroom?"

The reaction began to catch up with him and he was weak and trembling. It had been too long now since he had slept, and he was going on nerve alone. He took off his clothes and wrung the water out of them into the bathtub, and wrapped a towel around the cut on his arm. In a few minutes the doctor knocked on the door and handed him a terry-cloth robe and a small glass of whisky.

"You can come out in a minute and I'll fix that arm of yours," he said. "You're probably hurt worse than she is."

"How is she?" Reno asked, feeling the sudden release from tension. There'd been no gunshot wound.

"A little weak. Some shock, of course. She had a bad blow on the head, but no concussion, apparently. She'll be all right."

"Is she able, to travel?"

"Possibly, but I wouldn't advise it. Does she have to? Tonight?"

"Yeah," Reno said laconically. "Tonight."

He downed the whisky with a gulp and went out into the front hall to the telephone. He called the railroad station, found there was a westbound train in a little over two hours, and tried to reserve a bedroom. There was none available, but he managed to get a roomette. Then he dialed the hotel.

"Hello," he said. "Mrs. Conway, in Room Twelve-o-six, has had an accident. Car went in the canal. And she has to catch a train in two hours. So listen. Make out her bill, send a boy up to get her luggage, and shoot him out here in a cab with it. Just a minute and I'll give you the address." He called in to the physician, and repeated it over the telephone. "And rush it, will you?"

He went back into the office. She was sitting up with a sheet wrapped around her. Her face was deathly white and he could see she had been crying. The doctor took three stitches in his arm and bandaged it, and after Reno had explained about the clothes coming from the hotel, he went back into the dining room to finish his dinner.

As soon as he was out the door she looked up and whispered shakily, "I'll never be able to thank you."

The doctor had left some cigarettes on a table. Reno lit two of them and gave her one. "Forget it," he said. "You're just lucky he missed you with

that rifle. But you've got to get out of this country. As soon as you can change clothes I'll take you to the train. And get this: Don't come back here. He still thinks he got us both, but he'll know better as soon as they fish that car out."

Her eyes were sick with horror. "But why? Why?" she asked piteously. "Who was it?"

"I don't know." Everything said it had to be Conway, but how could he tell her that her own husband had tried to murder her? Or did he need to? Wasn't that what she was thinking herself?

"If all your money was in your purse"" he went on, "I'll lend you enough to get to San Francisco. You can mail it back."

She shook her head. "Thank you, but I have some traveler's checks in one of my bags."

He swung around toward her. "Those reports of Mac's. Were they in the car?"

"No. They're in one of the bags too."

"Well?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "It's the least I can do."

The luggage came. She paid the hotel bill and the taxi and went into another room to dress. Reno put his damp clothes back on and paid the doctor. When she returned, smartly turned out again except for the wet hair, which she had covered with a scarf, Reno looked at the clock in the office and saw they still had an hour to catch the train.

They went out and got in the car. He drove two or three blocks and pulled to a stop under a street light. She had the two envelopes in her lap.

Wordlessly she handed him the first one. His big hands were awkward and shaking a little with excitement as he slid the papers out of the envelope.

Dear Mrs. Conway:

As you have no doubt gathered from my telegram, I have located Mr. Conway's automobile. Notwithstanding your reluctance to appeal to the police, I went to them almost the first thing after checking in at the hotel, since—as I told you in San Francisco—I believe this could be serious enough to warrant it. And I think you will agree with me when I tell you that the automobile has been impounded by the Traffic

Detail in their garage since the twenty-second of July, only two days after the date of Mr. Conway's last letter. It was picked up at that time in a tow-away zone.

In reference to my telegram, one of the first things I noticed about the car after picking it up was that there was an apparently newly installed trailer hitch on it. Since it might or might not be a significant lead, I wired you to learn whether it had been on there when the car left San Francisco. And since you say it was not, obviously Mr. Conway had it put on somewhere between there and here, which of course made it highly significant. Whatever he was towing when he arrived in this area might be still around somewhere, and if I could find out what kind of trailer it was I could give the police a description of it and get their assistance in running it down. With that idea in mind I started backtracking along the highway, stopping at all service stations to make inquiries. I kept at it until midnight and then on the following day, covering almost a hundred miles before I located a man who remembered the car. His general description of the driver checked closely with that of Mr. Conway. He also stated there was only one person in the car.

Reno grunted. Mac had the same hunch I did, he thought. And probably she had it too, though she wouldn't admit it. But if Conway was meeting somebody, she hadn't shown up. He went on reading.

Questioned about the type of trailer, the service-station attendant insisted that what Mr. Conway had been towing was not a trailer at all, but a boat. He was quite definite on this point and was even able to give me a rather good description of it, since, fortunately, he was a fisherman and interested enough to examine it. It appeared to be the usual rig, rather common in this country, consisting of a pipe-frame-and-axle trailer with the boat cradled between the wheels. The boat itself, he said, had apparently been bought at a sporting-goods store, since it was a lightweight skiff of about ten feet and was varnished rather than painted.

Needless to say, I would be inclined to doubt the whole thing if it were not for the finality of the man's identification of the car, and the

fact that it does have a trailer hitch installed. There seems to be no logical reason why Mr. Conway would need a boat if he were coming to Waynesport on business, and if, on the other hand, he were going fishing, there are hundreds of boats for rent all along the ship channel and the bayous of this area.

I So far I have had no success in tracing his movements beyond this point, but tomorrow I shall take the car and start covering the area south of the city, the forty miles or so of ship channel and bayou between here and the Gulf, for which he must obviously have been heading if he were towing a boat.

Very truly yours,

WALTER L. MCHUGH

Reno slipped the report back inside its envelope and looked around at Mrs. Conway. She shook her head with utter hopelessness.

“I have no idea what- on earth he would have wanted with a boat,” she said.

It’s crazy, Reno thought. The whole thing’s insane. He took the other report and spread it open.

Dear Mrs. Conway:

I am writing this in the early morning to try to catch today’s air mail with it. Two days of search since my first report have turned up a few facts and conclusions, which I shall pass on to you before continuing. The first of these is that it is quite definite now that your husband was not headed for Waynesport at all—that is, not for the city itself—but for the, country around Counsel Bayou, some thirty-five miles southwest of here on the ship channel. He apparently drove right through the city, stopping just long enough, to mail the letter to you. The service-station attendant referred to in the previous report believes it was around three-thirty P.M. When he stopped there for gasoline. That was nearly a hundred miles north of Waynesport, a good two hours drive for anyone pulling a boat. And the only other person who can remember seeing him states that just at dusk he was thirty-five miles down the ship channel below the city. Since we already know he

did not register at any Waynesport hotel on that night, this appears likely.

The witness, a girl living at a tourist camp and fishing resort on Counsel Bayou, states that she saw the boat and car parked momentarily just across the highway from a roadhouse named the Counselor about a quarter mile from her cabin. She says there was one man in the car and that he was apparently doing nothing except sitting there looking at the front of the inn. After she had driven past she happened to glance into the rear-view mirror and see him start up. He followed her a short distance down the highway and turned off onto an old dirt road leading into the timber as if he were going camping or fishing. To this date I have found no one who saw him after that time.

Along the other line of search, I have turned up nothing at all. I mean, of course, the attempt to find someone who knew Mr. Conway and what the business was that brought him down here. In spite of the fact that it was your impression that he is from this area and that his family has lived here for a long time, no one recalls any member of the four Conway families living in the county who in any way answers his description. I have talked to nearly all of them personally, visited the police and some of the county officers, and questioned a number of men who served on county draft boards during the war, and so far have had no success at all. This is extremely odd in view of the general background he obviously had from your description of him as a man of considerable education and culture and who must necessarily have come from a family of some means, if not prominence. If it were not for the fact that he was obviously quite familiar with this section, I would say that you had probably been mistaken in believing he came from here.

I am going back down the channel today to make more inquiries around and beyond Counsel Bayou, and will advise you of further developments.

Very truly yours,

WALTER L. MCHUGH

Reno looked up from the last page and she was watching him anxiously. "What do you think?" she asked.

“That it’s a little funny Mac didn’t have a picture of him,” he said. “How come?”

“I didn’t have one.”

“Isn’t that a little odd? No picture at all?” She nodded. “I asked him a number of times to have some photographs made and he always said he would. But he kept putting it off. And there were no snapshots because neither of us owned a camera.”

“But you met him in Italy. So he must have had a passport.”

“I couldn’t find it. I looked everywhere.”

Reno stared thoughtfully through the windshield. “In that case, he either destroyed it or took it with him. And if he took it, he must be leaving the country.”

“Yes,” she said wretchedly. “I’ve thought of that.”

Suddenly she hunched forward with her hands over her face, shaking as if with a violent chill. “I’m sorry,” she whispered in a moment, her voice taut with horror. “It keeps coming back. The gun—and the glass breaking—and the car turning over.”

Reno waited until she had recovered. “Now, about that telephone call from Mac,” he reminded gently.

“Oh.” She took the cigarette he offered and held it mechanically between her fingers, forgetting it. “It was the same day he wrote the second report. In the afternoon. Of course, I hadn’t received the report at that time, but he told me what was in it and asked me some questions. They were rather odd, the things he asked, but he didn’t explain except to say he wanted to be sure about something and that he would write me that night or the next day. And, of course, he never did, because that night he was killed.”

“What did he ask?”

“First, whether Mr. Conway had ever mentioned being in Italy with the Army during the Second World War. And whether he had a little scar, like an old burn, along the side of his left wrist. And last, whether he ever addressed people as ‘old boy’—you know, the way some of the English do.”

“And the answers?” Reno prompted.

“Yes. To all of them.”

Well, there it is, he thought bitterly. Mac ran it down at last. And he was killed before he could tell anybody else. Maybe we'll never know.

"Mr. Reno," she asked at last, her face full of bottomless misery, "what do you think it all means?"

He hated to do it, because he liked her. But, hell, he thought, she must know it herself. "I don't know," he said. "Except one thing that telegraphs itself all over the place."

"What is that?"

"It's simple enough. Your husband's name wasn't Conway."

He started the car in a minute and drove to the railroad station. Neither of them said anything until he parked on a street near the entrance. The train was coming.

"Now listen," he said, "I'm not going in with you. I'll be behind you all the time, but you'll have to carry your own bags until you get a redcap. Pick up your ticket and get aboard the train as fast as you can. I don't think there's a chance in the world he'll be around here, but I've quit trusting anybody. And I don't want him to find out who I am or what I look like."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll be around here, but I've quit advertising it. Now, if I were you, I'd get out of San Francisco. And don't leave a forwarding address. It's always possible whoever it was might go out there after you. But let me know where you are. Write me care of General Delivery here. I think that's about it, except that next time somebody says he has some information for you, tell him to meet you at a police station or just write you a letter."

He saw her get aboard, a lonely figure going slowly up the steps. Then he drove the car back to the U-Drive agency and took a cab to the hotel. He was numb with weariness, but he changed clothes and called the police station.

The Lieutenant had gone off duty. There was only one Wayland in the telephone book, however, so he caught another taxi and went out to his home. A pleasant-faced woman admitted him and left the two of them alone in the comfortable living room. Wayland was pasting stamps in an album.

"Sit down," he said, leaning back in his chair. "What's on your mind?"

Reno remained standing. "I don't know whether you bring your job home with you or not, but I've got some news that wouldn't keep. It proves

she didn't do it, and you can turn her loose. The man that killed McHugh is still doing business."

The tough brown eyes expressed no emotion whatever. "What makes you think so?"

"He just tried to kill Mrs. Conway."

"Mrs. Conway?" Then the name registered. "Oh, I remember. What happened?"

Reno told him. When he had finished Wayland stared at him thoughtfully. "Where is she now?"

"I put her on a train for California."

"Why?"

"Why?" Reno repeated. "You want another corpse on your hands? Whoever it was will try again."

"We might be able to protect her. Did that ever occur to you?"

"And what," Reno asked harshly, "would give me a stupid idea like that?"

"Look, Reno," Wayland said coldly. "I'm glad you were able to save her. And probably she is too. But you're going to get yourself in a jam if you don't watch your step. If somebody did try to kill that woman, you should have notified the sheriff and had her taken to a hospital. It's outside our jurisdiction, and we can't do anything about it except to notify the county people. And as far as its having anything to do with McHugh's murder, that's only your guess. So what if Conway was a foul ball? You don't even know he was, and it wouldn't prove anything if you did. And if you're trying to get your sister out on bail, you're talking to the wrong man. I haven't anything to do with that."

"I'm not trying to get her out on bail," Reno said curtly. "I don't want her out on bail. I want her turned loose."

"Well, this won't get it."

They stared at each other. "Listen," Reno said, the gray eyes hard, "the man who tried to kill Mrs. Conway is the one who killed McHugh. And I want him. Do you?"

"Yes. If there is such a man."

"There is. I just told you." Reno started for the door, and looked back. "And if you do want him, you'd better start looking. Because if I find him first he's going to be secondhand when you get him."



## Six

He was out on his feet, but sleep would not come. An endless horde of questions chased themselves through his mind. Who was Conway, and what had he been trying to do? And why, in the name of God, had he needed a boat? Where was the one little thing that tied it all together? Mac's death, Counsel Bayou, the girl with the dimple in her chin, Mrs. Conway's long-distance telephone call and the attempt on her life—they were all parts of the same thing; there was no longer any doubt of that, but what was it?

He sat on the side of the bed smoking cigarettes and pawing wearily through this senseless jumble of evidence. Counsel Bayou, he thought; you always come back to that. It was the last place anybody had ever seen Conway; it was where Mac had gone to ask questions that last day before he was killed. He stopped and jerked his head upright. The thing Vickie had said—that the only word she heard in the mumbled conversation between Mac and the killer there in the hotel room was something that sounded like “counsel.” That figured, he thought; but what did it prove?

The thing that was so terrible was that it was just beyond the tips of his outstretched fingers. Mac had known who Conway was. He found out definitely. The telephone call to Mrs. Conway proved that. He shook his head and groaned. If only Mac had had a chance to tell somebody . . .

At last, in desperation, he put through a call to Carstairs' residence in San Francisco. “Dick,” he said, “this is Pete again.”

“Sure, Pete,” Carstairs replied. “Anything new?”

“A little,” Reno said. He told briefly what had happened to Mrs. Conway and added that he had finally read Mac's reports. “The answer to this thing is down around that Bayou somewhere. But look. What I called about—I'm grabbing at straws. Mac found out something after he wrote that last report. He learned who the guy really was. And you gathered up his gear here at the hotel. There wasn't anything in it that would give us a lead? No unfinished report? No notes of any kind?”

“No,” Carstairs said regretfully. “There wasn’t a thing, Pete.” Then he added, as an afterthought, “There was a letter that came the other day, forwarded out here by the hotel. But it didn’t have anything to do with Conway.”

Reno frowned. “A letter, you say? From where?”

“Oh, from some friend of Mac’s in the FBI. Came after he was killed, and the hotel sent it on out here with the rest of his things. But as I say, it wasn’t about Conway. Some other guy entirely.”

Reno was gripping the telephone with sudden tenseness and leaning forward. “Who?” he barked. “What was his name?”

“As I remember, it was some joker named Counsel. Yes, that was it. Robert Counsel.”

Reno exhaled slowly. “All right, Dick,” he said softly. “Read it to me. I don’t care if you have to walk down to your office in your bare feet and pajamas to get it, but read it to me. Slowly, so I can write it down.”

“It’s right here at home, in Mac’s gear. You think Counsel was—?”

“Dick, will you read that letter?”

It took several minutes, writing it down in longhand. When he had hung up he read it over again.

Dear Irish:

Always glad to hear from an old classmate. This is all I’ve been able to dig up since your phone call this afternoon, but I think it’ll answer your questions. I just happen to have a friend who’s a major over at the Pentagon, and he was able to get at the joker’s service record.

Robert Counsel was a rare one, from the looks of it. Inducted as a private in 1942, though he had the educational background for a commission if he’d wanted it. Refused OCS also, so guess he meant it. Made sergeant, and was busted back to private for insubordination. General snottiness, the major said, judging from the record. Served in North Africa, then in Italy, and was still in Italy after the war ended. Had points enough to go home, but didn’t seem to care whether he did or not. Court-martialed in 1946 for black-market operations with stolen Army supplies. Sent to military prison Stateside and was released in 1951. Dropped out of sight and nothing on him since. No

criminal record or arrests for anything in civil life, as far as I can find in our records.

Odd thing about the case was the fact that they knew definitely that he'd got away with thousands of dollars worth of cigarettes and medical supplies, but never did find any of it or any money. He hadn't sent any money out of Italy that they could discover and apparently hadn't spent more than the usual GI quota in entertaining the local belles, nothing at all on liquor because he didn't drink. He had lived in Italy before the war, however, and spoke the language fluently, so probably had good connections. Good crooked connections, that is.

Nor did they ever catch anybody else involved in the shenanigan. He probably wasn't working alone, but they never did find the others, and he wouldn't talk. The general impression seemed to be that he was bored with the trial, and considered the officers of the court his social inferiors. Snooty; or did I say that?

Any time I can help you with an easy one like that, just let me know.

As ever,

CHUCK

There was a postscript. Reno studied it for a long time and shook his head. It didn't seem possible, but the more you learned about the mysterious Conway, the less you understood.

"P. S. They discovered he had a room in town. But when they searched it, all they found was a vacuum pump, the kind you use in physics or chemistry lab in college. When you figure out what he was doing with that, drop me a line, will you?"

Reno sat on the side of the bed and looked at the cigarette in his hands. I'm headed in the right direction, he thought, but I'll be nuts before I get there. Mac was killed because he was looking for Conway. Mrs. Conway was almost killed, apparently for the same reason. And if you accepted all the evidence and agreed that Conway and Counsel were the same man, what did you have? You had a dilettante GI with overtones of larceny, and a vacuum pump, and a trailer hitch, and a boat that had disappeared. You also had his showing up back in Italy a year after he was released from military prison, and something he read in the Waynesport paper . . .

I've got to get some sleep, he thought. A few more hours of this and I'll be running down the street foaming at the mouth.

\* \* \*

The next morning he felt refreshed, with his mind clear again, and he knew what he had to do. He bought a secondhand car with out-of-state license plates and checked out of the hotel, giving San Francisco as a forwarding address. Then he bought some fishing tackle, picking it up in secondhand stores and pawnshops so it wouldn't be glaringly new.

Then he went to see Vickie.

She came into the little room with the detective and sat down across from him at the table as she had done before. There were shadows under her eyes, and he knew how desperately she was fighting for composure. Strain, he thought bitterly; nobody could stand it forever.

"What's new, Pete?" she asked, trying very hard to smile. She took a long puff on the cigarette he gave her.

He leaned forward and spoke rapidly, keeping his voice down. "Conway. He gets riper every time you look at him." He told her about reading Mac's reports, but omitted any mention of the murder attempt on Mrs. Conway. Vickie had enough on her mind without worrying about him.

"You think he might be the one who—"

"I don't know," he said grimly. "Not yet. But the whole deal is rotten, and I'm going to find out what it was. And the place to find out is Counsel Bayou. I'm going down there, but I'm not taking a brass band or wearing a sandwich board. I'll keep in touch with you through Gage. So don't let any of those damn reporters find out who I am or where I am, and don't talk to anybody."

"It's dangerous, isn't it?" she said. —He shook his head. "No. It's just that I wouldn't find out anything."

"No," she said, her voice going thin and tight. "You can't lie to me, Pete. And I can't let you do it. He's already killed M-Mac." She had been holding her face together with an intense and concentrated effort, but now it all gave way at once and she broke. She put her head down on her arms and her body shook with crying.

He waited helplessly until she had recovered. When she looked up at him at last with her eyes full of tears he patted her hand and said, "Don't worry about me, Vick. I've hunted a lot in that kind of country, and I know the ground rules. You just hang on a little while longer, and we'll have it made."

\* \* \*

"Counselor," the sign said, its twisted tubes of red and blue glass blank and unlighted in the sun. A glaring shell driveway led off the road to the left to swing up before the wide veranda of what had obviously been a residence at one time, a large house with the columned stateliness of another era. An expanse of lawn was now a parking area, completely empty at this time of the afternoon.

Reno slowed, going past on the highway. This was where it was, he thought. He was pulled off here at the side of the road with the car and boat trailer, just looking at the place, when the girl went by and saw him. Maybe he was waiting for somebody, or maybe, if he really was Counsel, he was looking at the house he used to live in turned into a joint with two tons of neon out in front. He glanced around at the drowsy late-summer afternoon, the dark wall of moss-hung oaks on both sides of the highway beyond the inn, and the steel bridge up ahead shimmering in the sun, appraising the somnolent peacefulness of it. And, on the other hand, he reflected, maybe his name was just what he said it was and he was only running out on his wife like a thousand other men and I've got rocks in my head.

Beneath the bridge the water was dark and still, some fifty yards across and overhung with trees. One of the arms of Counsel Bayou, he thought, trying to remember the map he had studied. It connected with the larger, dredged Bayou that was the ship channel, off to the left, and there should be another arm of it crossing the highway a mile or so ahead. Then he saw the other sign on the right, just beyond the bridge. "Gulfbreeze Camp," it read. "Cabins. Boats. Live Bait." The road swung off the highway into the oaks, and as he made the turn he caught glimpses of buildings and the sheen of sunlit water somewhere beyond.

One weathered building contained a lunchroom and a store with a gasoline pump out in front, and behind it, along the edge of the bayou, a

row of cabins squatted dejectedly under the trees with their backs to the water. Weeds poked their way up through the ubiquitous shell paving in places and all the buildings needed a coat of paint. Dying on its feet, Reno thought, as he got out of the car.

He went into the lunchroom. It was empty except for a blonde girl in a white apron sitting at one of the stools rasping her nails with an emery stick. She glanced languidly up at him as he came in, and got up to go around in back of the counter.

"Yes, sir?" she asked, raising her eyebrows a little. They were plucked to a thin line, and the somewhat petulant small mouth was a crimson splash of lipstick.

"Cup of coffee," Reno said. As she was drawing it he noticed a large mounted bass over the door going out into the store at the other end of the counter. Good eight pounds, he thought.

"They catch that around here?" he asked, nodding.

She put the coffee down and glanced indifferently at the fish. "I reckon so."

"Nice bass."

She shrugged. "Is that what it is?"

Fine front man for a fishing camp, Reno thought. But maybe bass just don't do anything to her. "You got a vacant cabin?" he asked.

"Sure. Lots of 'em." She was studying her nails again.

I can understand that, he thought. "I'd like to rent one, if it wouldn't trouble you too much. How much are they?"

"By the day or week?"

"By the week."

She appeared to look at him for the first time. "Alone?"

"That's right."

"Eighteen dollars, I think. You can talk to Skeeter. He'll be back in a minute."

"Skeeter?"

"Mr. Malone. He owns the place."

He wondered if Mac had talked to her. It was a girl living at this camp who saw the car and boat parked in front of the inn. And where was it he first began to get the hunch that Conway was Robert Counsel? It couldn't have been from this girl, though, because she wouldn't remember that much

about Counsel. She wasn't old enough. He had been gone from here for nine years, and she wasn't over twenty-two or twenty-three. But somewhere down here Mac had found out a lot of things. Too many things, he thought.

"Business a little slow?" he asked, stirring the coffee.

"Lousy. Except on week ends," the girl replied. A car pulled up in front and he could hear a man come into the store. "There's Skeeter now, if you want to talk to him."

He paid for the coffee and went through the door into the other room. The shelves were filled with groceries, and a long showcase contained fishing tackle, mostly cheap stuff from the looks of it, the kind of things vacationers and tourists bought. The man was behind the opposite counter at the cash register.

He glanced up at Reno with the briefest of nods, a thin, tough slat of a man dressed in khaki trousers and shirt, the sallow face and small black eyes as devoid of expression as a closed door. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I'd like to get a cabin for a couple of weeks if the fishing's any good," Reno said. "How're the bass hitting?"

"They been taking some. Mostly with live bait, though. Water's pretty warm."

"Well, I'll give it a whirl."

He paid a week's rent in advance, and Malone came outside with him, carrying the key. Getting into the car, he followed the lank figure around the corner of the building and along the row of cabins. It was the last one, directly behind the store building and next to the boat landing, where a half-dozen skiffs were tied up. Malone unlocked the door and they went in. It smelled musty, but the bare pine floor looked clean. It contained a bed and an old dresser with one of the drawers missing, and a door at the back opened into a small kitchen with a wood cookstove and an oilcloth-covered table. The door at the right of the room led into the bathroom, which had a small window looking out toward the boat landing.

"Hot water tank's hooked to the cookstove," Malone said. "If you don't figure on doing any cooking, you can get hot water to shave with up at the kitchen."

"O.K.," Reno said. They went out and stood for a moment on the small porch, squinting at the white sunlight. "Boats are extra, I suppose?"

Malone nodded. "Two dollars a day. I'll bring down a pair of oars." He went off toward the store and Reno began carrying in his duffel from the car. Malone came back in a minute and leaned the oars with their leather guards against the wall of the porch.

"Take any boat you want," he said, jerking his head toward the landing float.

"Thanks." Reno leaned against the door and lit a cigarette. "Lots of water back up in there, I guess."

Malone took out a plug of tobacco and whittled off a corner with his knife. "Never fished here before?"

Reno shook his head. "I'm from out of state." He jerked a hand toward the license plate of the car.

"I wouldn't go too far, then, without a guide. Them bayous wind all over hell, and a man could get lost if he didn't know 'em."

"Why's everything around here named Counsel?" Reno asked casually. "The roadhouse over there, and the bayou?"

"Counsels used to own all of it. Rich family." Malone spat out into the yard, the black eyes flashing at nothing.

"But not any more?"

"Don't own any of it now. Ain't but one of 'em left, anyway, and nobody knows where he is. In the pen, probably, now he ain't got enough money to keep him out of it."

Not one of the old family friends, Reno reflected. If Conway was Counsel and he was coming back here, it probably wasn't to see Malone.

After the other had gone he finished unpacking and took off the suit he had been wearing, slipping on khaki trousers and a T shirt and an old pair of Army shoes. Going out on the porch to escape the stifling heat inside the cabin, he squatted in the shade and opened the tackle box. He took the reel out of its cloth bag and began methodically to oil it, his mind busy with the same old rat race of thought.

You figured out the answer to one question, and a dozen new ones sprung up to take its place. You could see now why Conway had brought his own boat, if he had to have one for some reason he alone knew. It figured if you added it up that way: Conway was Counsel, he'd grown up in this country and everybody would know him on sight, if he tried to rent one

he'd be recognized, and presumably he didn't want anybody to know he was here. But that still left the big one. Why had he needed a boat?

And the new one, Reno thought. If everybody knew him, how was it possible he'd been here since the twentieth of July without anyone's seeing and recognizing him? He considered it, and knew there were a couple of good answers to that. Maybe he wasn't here any more, and hadn't been since that first night. And maybe he was dead.

And in that case, who was doing all the shooting?

Impatience; took hold of him and he was no longer able to sit still. He slid the reel back in the tackle box. And stood up. One thing I can do right now, he thought, is to find that road where he turned off the highway. Setting the box back inside the cabin, he locked the door and was just going out to the--car when he heard a boat. The sound was different from that of an outboard, and he looked curiously up the bayou.

It shot into view around a wall of trees a hundred yards away, a two-seated runabout planing swiftly down the channel. Off the camp the man at the wheel swung hard over and came skidding in toward the landing, giving it full astern at the last moment. The boat settled as if pushed down in the water and eased up alongside the float. Reckless, Reno thought, but he can handle a boat. The man reached out a hand and steadied it while a girl stepped nimbly out, holding what looked like an old brief case under her arm.

She turned, laughed, and said, "Thank you."

The man in the cockpit raised his white cap in a mock-courtly gesture that revealed flaming red hair, and pushed at the float with his hand. There was a deep-throated growl of power as the boat slid away from the landing and vanished around the turn in the channel. The whole thing hadn't taken more than a minute.

Reno stood beside the car watching the girl come up from the landing. She was a little over average height wearing white slacks and a short-sleeved blouse, her short jet-black hair wind-blown from the ride. As she came nearer he observed that her eyes were dark brown, heavily lashed, and that the face was beautifully tanned.

Memory stirred. There was no doubt of it. Her chin, though quite stubborn and firm, was undeniably dimpled. This was the girl Vickie had described.

“Hello,” he said, as casually as he could.

The girl met his inspection coolly, nodded a “Good afternoon,” which was neither friendly nor unfriendly, and went on past. She turned into the third cabin up the row.

He had turned and started toward her cabin, but before he had taken a step he checked himself. Suppose it wasn’t really the same girl? Or suppose she was, but denied it? He’d have tipped his hand before he had been here twenty minutes. And there was something else. The papers had been full of the McHugh murder case for over ten days, and she had never come forward to back up Vickie’s story. Maybe he’d be a sucker to let her know who he was before he found out a little more about her. At least he’d found her. She would keep.

## Seven

He was still thinking about her as he got in the car, and it wasn't entirely about what she might know. A terrific-looking girl, he decided. And Vickie, with her professional ear, had called the shot when she'd said she had a good voice. The smooth contralto purr of that "Good afternoon" was like music. As he came around the store and started out to the highway he stopped on sudden impulse and went inside. Right here was a good place to get the lab report, he thought with sardonic humor.

The blonde girl was reading a newspaper at the counter. She looked up as he came through the door.

"Pack of cigarettes," he said. She reached in the case and handed them over, and as he slipped the cellophane off he asked, "Who's the Latin type?"

She smiled sweetly as she handed him his change and a book of matches. "Pretty, isn't she?"

"If you like 'em like that, I guess. What's she here for, the fishing?"

"Why didn't you ask her? As soon as you got your breath?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I was just curious. Doesn't matter. But she doesn't look as if she'd care much for fishing."

"Well, not for bass, anyway."

Sharpen your hatchet, kid, he thought. You can do better than that. He started to turn away indifferently. "Probably a schoolteacher on vacation."

The girl tucked a wisp of hair back of her ear. "She says she's an artist."

"A painter, eh?"

"I understand she likes muscles. She had Max Easter pose for her without his shirt."

"Easter? Who's he? I mean, when he has his shirt on?"

"A giant. Lives in a houseboat up the bayou. Some kind of a screwball." She looked at Reno appraisingly. "Built about like you are. Maybe she'll let you pose for her, too."

“Uh-uh. I’m just fat.” He lit a cigarette and threw the match toward the door. “What’s your name?”

“Mildred. Mildred Talley. And I know you’re not interested in hers, but it’s Patricia Lasater. Or so she says.”

“Mine’s Pete Reno.” He went toward the door. “I’ll see you at dinner, Mildred.” He stopped then, half through the doorway. “By the way, who’s the redhead with the speedboat?”

“Hutch Griffin. He runs a boat service a couple miles down the channel. If you want to know any more about him, you could ask her.”

He shook his head and waved, and went on out the door.

He drove slowly down the highway, looking, for the road turning off into the timber. According to Mac’s report, the girl—Patricia Lasater, probably, he thought had passed Conway parked across from the Counselor. Then he had started his car and come along behind her for a short distance before he swung off into the trees. So it had to be somewhere very near here. He went a half mile, a mile. Another steel bridge loomed up ahead. The other arm of the bayou, he thought, remembering the map.

He was almost past it before he saw it, a faint pair of ruts leading off the highway into the oaks. He had to hit the brakes and back up a little to make the turn. You’d certainly have to know where that was in order to find it, he thought.

It was quiet in the moss-hung dimness of the timber. The road, little more than a pair of ruts, dodged sharply around tree trunks and pushed through overhanging limbs that scraped along the top of the car. After about a quarter mile the underbrush thinned out a little and he could see the glint of sunlight on open water as he neared the edge of the bayou. He stopped and got out. It was fairly open here under the crowns of the big oaks and he could see the remains of two or three long dead campfires. Fishermen, he thought. There’s probably a piece of shelving bank along here somewhere where you can launch a boat off a trailer. Conway might have been headed here, all right. But for what? And if he launched his boat, what became of it? And the trailer? And, for that matter, Conway?

An examination of the hard ground told him nothing. There had apparently been a few cars and campers in here since the last rain, but there was no way of knowing when that had been. And it had been a little over a month now since Conway had turned his car into this dead-end road, so the

chances were very remote that any of these traces were his. He prowled moodily along the bank, having no idea of what he sought but drawn merely by the fact that this spot, this old camping place under the trees along a wild section of bayou, was the last place with which the mysterious Conway could be definitely linked before he had vanished.

He stopped to light a cigarette, squatting on his heels and looking out over the bayou through an opening in the tree wall along the shore. He smoked the cigarette out to the end and dropped it into the water below him. A small fish came up and batted at it, and then another. Fingerling bass, he thought, ready to tackle anything, even at that age. Idly he ran his gaze along the edge of the water, looking for more. And then suddenly he stopped, his face still and his eyes staring at a spot some eight feet off to the left while the hair prickled along the back of his neck. It was impossible. It just couldn't be.

He jerked his glance upward, measuring the height of the bank. It was at least four feet and almost vertical, a straight drop from the top of the bank to the edge of the water, where the sloping mud bottom began to drop away, gradually at first, and then plunging down out of sight through the tea-colored water. And still there it was, quite plainly seen just under the surface of the water, the track of an automobile tire!

He shook his head. It was just some kid, he thought, playing with an old tire. Hurriedly springing up, he walked over and looked down. And there was another one, just the right distance over and more deeply pressed into the mud than the first, every tread distinct. There wasn't any doubt of it.

But no, he thought, his mind beginning to react now— not a car. A trailer—a boat trailer. But what fool would try to launch a boat here? It would probably go in upside down, and he'd never get the trailer back on the bank.

But maybe, he decided suddenly, whoever put it down there didn't want it back on the bank. What he needed was a boat and something to sound with. Turning, he ran back to the car and climbed in.

When he got back to Gulfbreeze Camp, Mildred Talley was lying on the float in a fragmentary bathing suit and blue rubber cap. He waved to her as he went inside the cabin after the rod and his tackle box. Locking the door again, he gathered up the oars and went down to the float to pick out a skiff.

"Hello," she said, raising on one elbow. "How about a cigarette?"

"Sure." He dropped the gear in a boat and walked over to her. Pretty, he thought, if she'd give her face a chance. Did she expect to swim in all that make-up? She'd poison the fish.

"You close the lunchroom and go out of business?" he asked.

"Delia is up there," she said. "She's my sister. Mrs. Skeeter Malone."

"I see."

She sat up and took the cigarette, waiting for him to light it. "You just missed your friend."

He held the match for her. "My friend?"

"Miss Lasater. She just went up the bayou with an outboard."

"Oh," he said absently, still thinking about the trailer. The sun was far down against the wall of trees now and he had a long mile to pull with the oars to get back there.

"Maybe you'll run into her up there. If you go far enough."

"Is that what she goes up there for? To run into people?"

"I didn't say that." She smiled archly. "You did."

"Maybe she's painting," Reno said absently. Why's she got her harpoon in that black-headed girl? He thought. "It's impressive country for landscapes."

"I guess so," Mildred replied. "Anyway, she spends a lot of time up there. And I'd be the last one in the world to suggest that she was going fishing with Robert Counsel."

He had been only half listening to her, and the name came slashing into his reverie like a whip. He managed to keep his face still. "Afraid I don't get you," he said, puzzled. "Fishing with who?"

She laughed. "I forgot you didn't come from around here. It was a kind of saying they used to have. Going fishing with Robert Counsel."

"And not referring to bass fishing, I take it?"

"Not so you could tell it. It meant a girl was up to something she shouldn't be. Wild parties. That kind of stuff."

"And who was Robert Counsel?"

"His grandfather used to own all this land around here. The Counselor's their old house. He lived there with his mother when I was just a kid. And he had a fishing camp or lodge way up the bayou that she didn't know anything about. I used to hear the older girls talking about it. Ummm, brother!"

“Wonderful what you can do with money,” Reno said.

“It wasn’t only the money. Or the speedboats and the foreign car. He was a smooth job himself. Old family. And good-looking. I used to see him once in a while, but I was just a kid and he never noticed me, of course.”

“And now I suppose he’s married, with three or four kids, an ulcer and a job in the bank?”

She shook her head. “Nobody knows. He’s been gone from here for years. Never did come back after the war.”

“Was he killed overseas?”

“No, I don’t think so.” She stopped and was silent for a moment, gazing out abstractedly over the water. “Somebody who’s well known like that, you hear all kinds of stories about him. You know how it is. He was blinded. He was court-martialed for some silly thing. He lost both legs. A lot of people didn’t like him, anyway. And a few of them hated him, I guess. Like Max Easter.”

“Easter? Oh, the big guy. He hated him?”

She nodded. “Robert Counsel ran away with his wife. Or so they think.” She broke off abruptly. “But I’m keeping you from your fishing.”

So Easter hated him, Reno thought, pulling up the bayou with long strokes of the oars. Maybe he had a lot of enemies around here. Maybe that was the reason he was trying to get in here without anyone’s recognizing him. But why the boat? He swore under his breath and yanked savagely at the oars. I could stop that, he thought irritably. If I want to beat my brains out, why don’t I just wonder what he was doing with a vacuum pump?

The sun was gone from the water by the time he rounded the last bend and the long reach of the bayou stretched out dark and tranquil ahead of the skiff. He pulled over against the shore and began watching, knowing he was close. It was even darker under the trees, but in a few minutes he made out an open space that looked like the camp ground. Easing the boat up against the bank, he located the tire marks just under the surface of the water. Now, he thought.

Pulling a short distance straight out from shore, he let the boat come to rest on the mirror-like surface and set up the casting outfit, tying on a heavy spoon with a treble hook. The first two casts were unproductive. Maybe the water was a little deeper than it looked, he decided. The next time he let the spoon sink until he was sure it was on the bottom before he started his

retrieve. This time he hit it. He felt the spoon bump something, hang up for an instant, and jerk free. Casting back to the same place, he hooked it solidly.

Not brush or weeds, he thought, feeling the excitement now. It was too rigid. Slowly he began winding the reel, pulling the boat back over the spot. When the line led straight down into the darkening water he lay flat on the stern of the boat and poked around with the rod tip. It encountered nothing. Still deeper, he thought. Hurriedly slipping the reel off its seat so it wouldn't get wet, he stretched farther out over the stern, putting his head into the water and extending the full length of his arm and the five-foot tubular steel casting rod. He felt it then. The rod tapped something below him and the sound was unmistakably that of metal against metal. Swinging the rod back and forth, he heard it scrape against steel for two or three feet before he lost contact. He knew what it was—the pipe frame of a boat trailer, the shaft between axle and trailer hitch.

He raised his head and let water run out of his hair while he took a deep breath and considered his find with growing elation. It had to be Conway's trailer. Nobody else would deliberately push into the bayou something that probably cost well over a hundred dollars, and it proved beyond any doubt that Conway had been up to more than a simple fishing trip.

But what next? He'd have to get a rope to haul it out where he could get a look at it. That was what he would do—go to town in the morning, pick up a piece of light line, and come back here with the boat. It would be easy to swim down and make the line fast to it, go ashore with the other end, and haul it up. Maybe there was some clue. . . . Maybe Conway was on it.

Looking up, he turned his head to estimate the distance from the bank and fix the spot exactly. It was about thirty feet straight out from the tire marks. It was then he saw the boat.

He sat up, startled. It was Patricia Lasater in a skiff less than fifty yards away, pulling down the channel on the oars and looking over her shoulder at him. He had been so intent on his activity he hadn't heard her. But why hadn't she been using the motor he could see on the stern of her boat?

She stopped rowing and the skiff came to rest alongside his. He looked across at her and nodded, busy putting the reel back on the rod and conscious of the water dripping out of his hair onto his clothing.

The brown eyes regarded him with faint irony. "A new method of stalking bass?" she asked.

"No," he said shortly. "Hung up on some brush. I was trying to work the spoon loose."

"Oh." She smiled delightfully, looking very cool and attractive in the blouse and crisp white slacks. "I was afraid you were going to drown. You looked for all the world like a feeding duck."

Reno was conscious of the baffled irritation of all males caught in something ridiculous by a pretty girl. "Is your motor broken down?" he asked stiffly.

She shook her head. "It's all right. I was just rowing because I like the bayou at dusk and wasn't in any hurry."

That's possible, he reflected grudgingly. After all, she shouldn't have any reason to suspect what was down there. He was becoming suspicious of everybody. "Have you been sketching?" he asked, nodding toward the old brief case in the stern of the boat. "The girl at the camp tells me you paint."

"A little."

"Oils?"

She nodded. "I teach it at college."

"Have you been here long?"

"About two months. Did you get your plug loose?"

"No. It's useless." He reeled in the rest of the line and yanked straight back through the guides. The line parted. "It's time to start back, anyway."

She glanced around at the deepening twilight. "Pass me your anchor rope and I'll give you a tow with the motor."

\* \* \*

He was up early the next morning, out on the bayou working the shore line with a bass plug. Since he was supposed to be here for the fishing, he had to make it look good. At eight o'clock he changed clothes and went into Waynesport to buy the line. He thought of going to see Howell Gage, but decided to wait until after he had the trailer out. There might be something really important to tell him after he'd had a look at it.

When he got back to camp he remembered he hadn't bought cigarettes while in town. He walked around to the lunchroom. It was empty, but just

as he stepped inside he heard the low sound of voices out in the store.

A woman said something he didn't catch, and then there was the deadly monotone of Skeeter's voice. "I tell you she talks too damned much. If you can't shut her big mouth, I can—" It chopped off abruptly as Reno let the door close.

A woman he hadn't seen before came through the doorway at the end of the counter. Delia, he thought; Mrs. Skeeter. She was an older version of Mildred, faded a little, and coldly intelligent rather than petulant.

"Yes?" she said.

"Package of cigarettes," Reno replied. Tough baby, he thought. I wonder if Mac talked to her.

He went back to the cabin. Picking up the tackle box and rod, he got the coil of rope out of the car and went down to the float. He put the rope under the stern seat and shoved off, and as he swung to look up the channel a flash of movement caught his eye. Swinging quickly back, he looked again, and saw it was Patricia Lasater in her skiff, going slowly along the opposite shore near the first turn. When he rounded the turn, some two hundred yards ahead, he looked again. She was nowhere in sight. The whole stretch of the bayou to the next bend was empty.

That was odd. She couldn't have gone ashore; her boat would still be along the bank somewhere. And she certainly couldn't have reached the next bend; that was at least a quarter mile away. Then he remembered. There was another of the innumerable arms of the bayou branching off along here somewhere. He had seen it last night. When he pulled abreast of it he saw her. She had just beached her skiff not fifty yards away, inside the entrance, and was climbing out. He suddenly ceased pulling at the oars, and stared in amazement at the man who had just stepped out of the timber along the shore.

He was one of the largest men Reno had ever seen, a gray haired giant whose shoulders had the solid, wedge-shaped look of power and who towered over the girl as if she were a child. He carried a rifle in the crook of his arm and made no effort to help her as she climbed the bank. While Reno watched, they turned and started into the timber, the big man in the lead. Easter, he thought, remembering Mildred Talley's description. There couldn't be two people that size around here. A screwball of some kind, she had said. Just what had she meant by that? Probably, he reflected cynically,

anybody who doesn't chew gum. But why had Patricia Lasater met him up here, and where were they going? , He shrugged, and dug in the oars. There was no use guessing, and he had more important business. There shouldn't be any interruptions this time.

When he arrived at the spot some twenty minutes later he set up the casting rod again, without the reel, and carefully lined up the tire marks in the mud. Lying flat in the stern, he began swinging the rod back and forth below him as he had yesterday. The rod encountered nothing, and after a minute or so of futile search he raised his head, taking another bearing on the tracks. The boat had drifted over a little.

He moved it slightly, using one oar as a paddle, and tried again. Still he met with no success. With vague irritation he raised his head and looked around, thinking he would have to drop anchor anyway to hold the boat still. But no, it was where he had put it.

Nuts, he thought impatiently, why waste time probing for it? He had to dive anyway. Stepping forward, he dropped the anchor overboard, then looked up and down the desolate stretch of bayou. There was no one in sight. Stripping off his clothes and watch, he dropped quickly over the side. He took a deep breath and let go the gunwale, swimming straight down. The water was only some ten feet deep, and almost immediately he felt the soft mud bottom under his hands. Moving slowly then, in a widening circle, he put out his arms to keep from bumping the wheels or axle with his head. He had a bad moment when the thought occurred to him again that Conway might be tied to the trailer, but with quick revulsion he shoved it out of his mind. Once his hand brushed something and he thought he had found it, but it was only the concrete block of the anchor. When his lungs began to hurt he kicked upward and took another breath as his head broke the surface. I couldn't have been that far off in my bearings, he thought angrily. It's got to be right here under me.

The truth began to come home to him then. The next dive settled it. Lying on the bottom in the warm, tea-colored water with his hands probing into one of the holes in the mud where the wheels had settled, he knew the answer.

There had been a trailer, or something, here last night, but it wasn't here any more. Somebody had moved it.



## Eight

He climbed back into the boat and dressed, and stared coldly out across the bayou as he thought of Patricia Lasater. So she'd just happened to come along, the way she'd just happened to be with Mac the night he was killed. He cursed, and sculled the boat over against the bank to find the tracks where it had been pulled out. Then he sat and stared. There weren't any.

The old tracks were still there, but after he'd covered a hundred yards in each direction he knew the trailer had not been pulled up on the bank. It had been moved by boat. But how? None of the skiffs at the camp would support it, even the submerged weight of it. And when he stopped to think of it, how could she have moved it anyway? It would have taken a powerful man to lift that trailer far enough off the bottom to tow it. Well, she knew a powerful man, didn't she? She was with him right now.

Back at the camp he took a shower, changed into white slacks and a T shirt, and drove back to Waynesport. Howell Gage was prowling the office, dictating to a pretty brunette. When they were finished, Reno went in and sat down.

"Who's Robert Counsel?" he asked abruptly.

"An atavism," Gage said. "Feudal aristocrat washed up on the shore of Twentieth Century democracy. Why?"

"You remember Mac was looking for somebody?"

Gage sat down on the corner of his desk and tapped a cigarette against his thumbnail. "Joker by the name of Conway, as I recall. Vickie told me. So you think it was Counsel?"

Reno nodded. "I know it was. What I'm trying to find out is why." Briefly, he told of Mrs. Conway's narrow escape and of Mac's reports.

"How about the description?" Gage interrupted.

"Tall. Gray eyed. Erect way of walking. Cultured sort of voice, with only a trace of southern accent. Very assured, English-public-school manner, fluent Italian—"

“Counsel,” Gage interrupted, his eyes thoughtful. “But he couldn’t have been around here all this time without being recognized.”

“I realize that,” Reno said impatiently. “But the fact remains. McHugh found out it was Counsel he was after. The telephone call to Mrs. Conway clinches that. He wanted to know those other two things, and when she verified them he was certain. Then Mac was killed. Somebody got Mrs. Conway down here and she was almost killed. So when you add all that up, what do you get?”

“Counsel’s well hidden. Or he’s dead.”

“Right. And either way, somebody’s trying to cover his tracks.” He told of finding the trailer, and of its disappearance after the girl had caught him poking at it with the rod.

“Same girl who was with McHugh that night,” Reno added.

“We’ll have her picked up.”

“No.” Reno shook his head. “Sure, Vickie can identify her, if she is the same one. But just suppose it’s not, or that she refuses to talk? It’s just Vickie’s word against hers as to what she and Mac were doing together. And if she’d wanted to clear anything up, she’s had ten days already.”

“I see what you mean.” Gage nodded, deep in thought. “But I’d better warn you. You can get yourself in a jam. First, you didn’t report the attack on Mrs. Conway. And now you’re harboring a fugitive. That girl is still wanted—”

“And I still want the guy who killed Mac,” Reno said curtly. “I tried to sell the police this Conway deal and they weren’t having any. I’m telling you so you’ll have this much to go on just in case the guy gets behind me the way he did Mac. What I’ve got to find out is why Counsel came back here.”

“That’s not going to be easy. If he’s alive, you’re up against one of the damndest minds I’ve ever run into. And if he’s dead, he won’t tell you much.”

“I know. But look, here’s one other thing. It was something in the paper, the *Waynesport Express* of July twelfth, that brought him down here. Mrs. Conway’s positive of it. Can you get hold of a copy, from the paper itself or from the library?”

Gage thought a minute. “That’s easy.” He pressed the buzzer on the intercom. When the brunette came in, he tossed her the keys to his car.

“Drive out to my mother’s house, Miss Crews, and ask her to let you have the July twelfth *Express*.” He looked at Reno and grinned. “Tell her I’ll take good care of it.”

When the girl had gone, he added, for Reno’s benefit, “My mother hasn’t thrown anything away since her bridal bouquet. She keeps the papers for six months and sells them to the junkman.”

“Good,” Reno said. Then he went on, “Did you know Counsel?”

“As well as anyone, I guess. My grandfather used to have a place out near the Bayou, and I saw quite a bit of him when he was home. He and his mother spent a lot of time in Italy.”

“Can you think of any reason he’d come easing in here dragging a boat? After being gone that long?”

Gage shook his head. “None at all. Except that nothing Robert Counsel did would ever surprise me.”

“Don’t be too sure. Maybe this will.” Reno pulled from his pocket the copy of the letter from McHugh’s friend in the FBI. He tossed it across the desk.

When Gage had read it, he shook his head and handed it back. “That’s Robert. Bored with the court-martial.”

“You’re not surprised he was caught stealing. Had he been in trouble before?”

“Not as far as I know. But let’s just say that it wasn’t out of any regard for what he’d consider middle-class morality. Probably he’d never had to steal before.”

Reno gestured with irritation. “He doesn’t make much sense to me.”

Gage crushed out his cigarette and leaned back in his chair. “And the more you talk to people around here, the less he’s going to make. Too many contradictory factors.”

“Such as—” Reno prompted impatiently.

“Well, to begin with, Robert Counsel should have been a mamma’s boy, by all the rules. But he wasn’t. He was one of the coldest-nerved devils I ever saw. Mamma thought he was her little darling, all right, but she didn’t know the half of it. He had all the drive, audacity, and brilliance of one of those success-story characters who’s born on the wrong side of the tracks and winds up owning half the continent before he’s thirty-five—except that he was already rich when he was born and had nothing but contempt for all

the peasant virtues like work. But there was a touch of genius about him in the things that did interest him, like poetry, architecture, the fine art of seduction, speedboat design, and explosives.”

“Explosives?” Reno asked, puzzled.

“Just one of the facets of a brilliant mind. I’m trying to show you what you’re up against in attempting to guess what it was he came back for. While the young princeling was being privately tutored, he was already branching out into one of the fields Mamma didn’t know anything about. In his spare time he was trailing around with another genius named Max Easter, learning to crimp dynamite caps and tamp powder charges to blast stumps out of fields. This Easter was a radical and a troublemaker, and an old-time powder monkey who could remove a stump right from alongside a house. Robert, I understand, could do the same thing, except that according to Max he had to watch him all the time to keep him from cutting the fuses too short just to relieve the tedium. The subconscious death wish, or only a screwball kid playing with dynamite? Take your choice.”

“Sounds more all the time like what Mac’s friend called him. A rare one.”

“He was. But if he’s really gone bad, God help everybody.”

“You say they were rich. And now the property’s all gone. What happened?”

“Nothing. Just attrition. Expensive tastes and no management after the grandfather died. They gradually sold everything. His mother died shortly after he was drafted.”

Reno sat deep in thought. “Well, that’s all we’ve got. He served his time in the military prison and then went back to Italy. When he returned to the States he came in through here on a ship. So in spite of what people think, he had been back once before he came down in the car. Something he saw in the paper made him come back, this time, bringing the boat. He and the boat both disappeared, and when Mac got too hot on the trail he was killed. What was he after?”

“That’s your question,” Gage said. “You answer it. I wouldn’t even guess.”

\* \* \*

Some fifteen or twenty minutes later Miss Crews returned with the newspaper. They each took a section, and for an hour they studied the columns for a clue.

They traded, and tried again.

Trying to put himself in Counsel's place, with the information he had gained so far, Reno first read all the local news items, a column at a time, but nothing clicked. What was there here that could have brought a man all the way from California? He ground his way doggedly through the obituaries, the want ads, the shipping news, and even the editorials. There were a half-dozen ads under the "Personals" heading in the classified section, but they were only the usual come-ons. The shipping news was routine: two loaded tankers had sailed, the government had let another contract for additional dredging of the channel, a Norwegian ship was discharging coffee from Santos. It occurred to him that he didn't know the name of the ship on which Conway, or Counsel, had returned from Italy. He could call Mrs. Conway and find out, but what would it prove? He folded the paper at last, conscious of the futility of his search. How could he find a clue when he didn't even know what he was looking for?

Gage did the same, and sighed. "Assuming Mrs. Conway was right," he said, "whatever it was jumped right into Robert's eye as soon as he looked at it. Only we're not Robert."

Reno stood up. "I'll bring it back to you in a couple of days. It's right here in front of us, and I'm going to keep trying until I stumble onto it."

"How about it Vickie? You want to see her?"

Reno hesitated, feeling the desire pulling at him. Maybe he could cheer her up. . . . At last he shook his head. "The less we advertise who I am, the better chance I've got. Just tell her to hang on a few more days."

## Nine

But what about the trailer? The girl had told somebody she'd found him poking at it with the rod, and the man she'd told had moved it. But did they suspect who he was? Or did they merely think he'd stumbled on it by accident, and had moved it before he could learn what it was? It made a lot of difference. He was playing a dangerous game with somebody in the dark, and if it developed the other man could see, his chances of finding out anything—or even of staying alive—were approaching the vanishing point.

Where did Patricia Lasater fit in? And how could she have any connection with this ugly business, whatever it was? She wasn't even from this part of the country, judging from her automobile license plates. And how did you tie in those brown eyes and that delightful smile with murder? He grunted, and angrily flipped the cigarette out into the darkness. Brown eyes, hell! She was in this up to her neck.

He got up and went inside the cabin. Switching on the light, he sat down on the bed and spread the newspaper open again. I'm Counsel, he thought doggedly; what do I see? Why do I have to go back to Counsel Bayou with a boat? Everything's sold, I've been away for years. . . . Moths flickered and danced around the light bulb and a mosquito buzzed near his ear. The old sense of futility seized him. He wasn't Counsel, he didn't even know Counsel; how could he know what the man had seen?

Why not walk over to the Counselor, and have a drink? Maybe a little rest would freshen his mind so he could see some pattern in all this senseless jumble. Before he went out he put the newspaper and the copy of Mac's letter in one of the suitcases and locked it.

\* \* \*

The neon sign was a blaze of garish light, and there were a few cars parked in the shell driveway. The front door opened into a short hall, which had

been made into a hat check stand. Through an archway on the left he could see the snowy tablecloths of the dining room, while the bar was beyond a smaller door on the right. It was air-conditioned and almost cold after the hot summer night. He sat down on a red leather stool and glanced around in the dimness. Two men in white suits rattled a dice cup against the smooth mahogany at the other end of the bar, and a tall blonde in an abbreviated pirate costume carried a tray of drinks back to the row of leather-upholstered booths. Somebody had spent a lot of money here. A little overripe for the fishing-camp trade, he reflected; there must be gambling upstairs.

“Martini,” he said, when the barman came over.

The drink was good and very cold. He was still sipping it and about to order another when the girl came in. He had been idly watching the door in the dark mirror behind the bar, and at first he didn’t recognize her. Both times he’d seen her before she had been dressed in slacks, but now she was very cool and lovely in a white skirt, white shoes, and a tawny wide-sleeved blouse. She went on past and sat down at one of the booths. Wonder if she gets paid overtime for snooping after five o’clock, he thought.

On sudden impulse Reno got up and walked back to her booth.

“Hello,” he said.

“Oh.” She looked up and smiled.

“Mind if I sit down?”

“Not at all. You’ll have to pay for your own drink, though. I’m a schoolteacher.”

“I’ll buy you one, if you’ll let me. I’m a patron of the arts.”

When the drinks came, he said, “My name’s Reno. Pete Reno. I already know yours. I asked.”

“Thank you. That’s quite flattering. What do you do, Mr. Reno, when you aren’t being a patron of the arts?” She paused, and smiled charmingly. “Or fishing with your head under water?”

She’s a cool one, he thought. Or didn’t she know he had gone back and found the trailer moved? “I’m a construction stiff,” he answered. “Dams—things like that. You name it, we build it.”

“It sounds interesting.”

“So does painting. Tell me about it. Do you sell them?”

She nodded. “A few. I ruin a lot more than I finish, though.”

“Landscapes?”

“Mostly.”

“How’d you happen to pick this country. I notice from your car that you’re from Ohio.”

She leaned back in the booth. The brown eyes were thoughtful, and a little moody. “It’s hard to explain, exactly, I’d seen it once before, and it interested me. It’s picturesque, but there’s more to it than that. A feeling, you might say.”

“What kind?”

“Peace? No. That’s only partly it. Deceptive peace, with violence just under the surface. I think that’s it. It’s a hard thing to capture, because the violence is only felt. But I’m probably boring you.”

“No,” he protested. “On the contrary.” He held out cigarettes and lit one for her.

“Probably most of it, of course, comes from the bayous themselves,” she went on. “The water is so quiet and dark, and yet you have a feeling of all sorts of things you can’t see, just below the surface.”

Like trailers, he thought. It was a good line, though, and she did it convincingly.

He glanced around at the bar. “Odd place,” he commented. “I understand it used to be a residence.”

She nodded, and he thought he saw a brief shadow of pity cross her face. “The fall of the House of Counsel, I suppose you’d call it. It’s a strange story, and a little tragic. Do you know it?”

“No. Only that they were a wealthy family and owned this part of the country at one time.”

“You might call it from family portraits to neon in three generations. And, incidentally, the portraits are very good. They’re all by the same man, an Italian, dead now, but who used to get very high prices for his commissions. The people who bought the house left them right where they were, and I come over here for dinner two or three times a week so I can look at them.”

“Speaking of dinner,” he said, “I’d like to see them too. How about having it with me, and pointing them out?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Why, yes. Thank you.”

Probably just what she was hoping for, he thought cynically. It should be an enjoyable meal with each of them trying to pump the other. He paid for the drinks and they went into the dining room.

There were three of the portraits. One was a tough-eyed older man somewhere in his fifties or sixties, the second was a handsome youth in the uniform of a flier in the First World War, but it was the third that caught the eye. It was obviously a young mother and her son, and in it the artist had been fortunate or skillful enough to capture something besides the golden good looks of the two. It was all in the mother's face, in the way she was looking at the boy. There was adoration, and devotion, and an almost voracious possessiveness. The boy appeared to be about five, with blond curly hair and gray eyes, very much the young aristocrat.

"Robert. The last of the Counsels."

"Grown up now, I suppose?" Reno asked politely.

She nodded. "He'd be—oh, thirty-three or thirty-four. That portrait was painted in 1923."

"You didn't know him, then?"

"Oh, no. Only some of the stories," she replied. "They say he hasn't been back here for years."

Just the routine press release, he thought. And that trailer swam away without any help. He looked at the portraits again, while the waiter brought their menus. "Grandfather, father, and son. Is that it?"

"Yes. The father was killed on the Italian front during the First World War. But not until after he had married. An expatriate American girl studying voice in Milan. In the winter of 1918 she came back here to have her baby. Robert Counsel was born in the same upstairs room as his father and grandfather. I understand there is a dice table there now. He didn't have any father, of course, and his mother's devotion to him was, from what they say, very close to neurotic.

"Daniel Counsel—the grandfather, and from all accounts a regular old pirate—was still alive then. I think he died in 1925. The family still had plenty of money, but it must have been a very lonesome life for a small boy, and maybe even a little unhealthy. They spent part of the time in Italy, and when they were here on the plantation he never went to school. Private tutors, mostly English, at least until he was of high-school age—"

She broke off suddenly. Five musicians had come in through the archway and were taking their places on the stand just beyond the small dance floor. It wasn't this, however, that had stopped her. He followed her gaze and saw a tall, red-haired young man bearing down on them.

The redhead stopped, glanced carelessly from Patricia Lasater to Reno and back again, and grinned. "Howdy, Miss Patricia. How y'all?" He winked at Reno, and said, "Yankee artist, looking for local color. Expects everybody to have a cawn pone in his mouth."

"Mr. Reno, Mr. Griffin," she said. Then she added, "Mr. Griffin flies a speedboat."

Reno stood up and they shook hands. He was conscious of a lean and reckless face, and cool green eyes with perhaps just a shade too much self-assurance. The well-tailored white linen suit and blue tie and handkerchief reminded him suddenly of his own indifferent clothing. What the hell? He thought. Who cared for her opinion?

"You don't mind if I sit down for a minute, do you?" Griffin asked. "I'll buy a drink. You can't eat on an empty stomach. Before Reno could nod assent he pulled out a chair and motioned impatiently for a waiter.

"I was just telling Mr. Reno a little about the house," Patricia said.

"Oh. Interesting place," Griffin looked at Reno. "You don't live around here, then?"

"No," he replied. "Just on vacation. Bass fishing."

"Oh, bass!" Griffin dismissed them with good-humored disdain. "Come down to my place and I'll take you out in the Gulf for some real fishing. Tarpon and kings."

Patricia looked up at this. "Is your new boat ready to go?"

"Sure. Came down from the yard yesterday. Taking it outside for a shakedown tomorrow or the next day. How about coming along?"

"I'd love it. You can go, can't you, Mr. Reno?"

Reno looked uncertain. "You too. I meant both of you," Griffin said, nodding.

"Well, sure. Thanks. I'd like to," he said. Why? He wondered. Haven't I got anything better to do than go yachting with these characters? But you never knew where you'd find what you were looking for. And she was going.

Patricia Lasater asked, "Do you think they'll ever find out what happened to the other one? Have you heard anything yet?"

Griffin shrugged. "Not a word. It's just one of those things they'll never solve."

Reno tried to keep the sudden stirring of interest from showing in his face. Another missing boat? "How's that?" he asked casually. "Somebody liberate one of your boats?"

Griffin stared at Patricia with burlesque amazement. "Pat, this man's from Mars. He hasn't heard about our explosion."

Patricia made no reply. Reno glanced across at her and saw her face had gone strangely still.

"Explosion?" he asked.

The redhead nodded. "It's a wonder you didn't read about it. Big mystery. Made all the papers, and even a blurb in *Time*."

"I've been in South America," Reno explained.

"Oh. That accounts for it." Griffin grinned briefly, and then went on. "A man—or maybe it was two men, they never could be sure—stole one of my boats one night, and it blew up out there in the ship channel."

"Gasoline tank?"

"Gas tank, my foot! High explosive. You should have seen the few pieces of it they found. . . . But maybe I'd better go back to the beginning. You're trapped anyway; you can't run without leaving your dinner, and Pat.

"You see, I run a small boat service down the channel below here; a little towing, oil barges and that sort of stuff. I also have a speedboat I rent to young bucks who want to give their girls a thrill, and I had a charter boat for offshore fishing. I live there on the dock, and don't keep a night watchman because I'm usually around somewhere. Well, one night in May—the tenth, I think—I had to go into Waynesport for something and didn't get back until after midnight. The charter boat—a twenty-seven-foot cabin job—was gone. Just gone, like that. I'd barely started inside to call the Coast Guard and the Sheriff when I heard the roar, up the channel. At first I thought the Mid-Gulf refinery had let go. It's up above here about ten miles.

"This whole end of the country was in an uproar in a few minutes, people calling the Coast Guard and the Highway Patrol, and each other. There was a big crowd here at the Counselor that night, and they could tell the blast was somewhere near on the channel because it rattled the

windows. People were out in cars, prowling around the country without even knowing what they were looking for, and the Coast Guard had boats searching the channel. And just before daybreak they found it—”

“Could you sort of play it down a little, Hutch? The next part, I mean?” Patricia interrupted quietly, her face pale.

“Sure.” Griffin patted her hand soothingly, but when he looked around at Reno his eyes were full of sardonic amusement. “Anyway, you’ll see why they were never sure whether it was one man in the boat, or two. It happened in the edge of the channel, near some overhanging trees. It stripped them, and blew out a hole in the bank. They found pieces of planking out in the fields. The only thing left of the boat that was recognizable was the motor, and that was on the bottom in the mud.”

“But what did it?” Reno asked.

Griffin leaned back in his chair and shook his head, smiling. “You tell me. They don’t have any more idea right now than they did the morning they found it.”

“But,” Reno insisted, “the men?” Didn’t anybody ever figure out what they were trying to do?”

“No. And not only that. To this day, they don’t even know who they were. They’re pretty sure there were two, but nobody’s ever turned up missing.”

For a wild instant Reno thought of Robert Counsel; then the idea died. This was in May, Griffin said, and Counsel hadn’t come down here until the twentieth of July.

“But they must have some theory,” he said. “Didn’t anybody ever come up with an idea?”

“Oh, sure,” Griffin replied easily. “Theories were a dime a dozen. There was the floating mine brain storm, first. You remember there were Nazi subs in the Gulf early in the war, potting the tankers, and a lot of people figure now they might have laid a few mines and that one of ‘em drifted fifteen miles up the ship channel. As a theory, it’s pretty sad.

“The unexploded torpedo idea was about the, same. They sink, anyway, I understand. And besides, when the explosives experts came down to look at the pieces, they blew all these theories sky-high; They proved the explosion came from inside the boat. Something about pressures, and the

direction some of the bottom planking had ruptured—what little they found.”

Griffin took another sip of his drink and grinned at them. “And then there was the theory I blew it up myself to collect the insurance. Of course, it would seem a little wasteful to blow up the men too, free, gratis, for nothing, because I didn’t have any insurance off them, but it’s easy to get around a little thing like that when you’re theory-hunting.

“Then there was the Max Easter school of thought. He used to be a powder monkey and is known to be a kind of virtuoso with high explosive. This brain storm did have a little more sense to it than most of the others, however, for they were having labor trouble up at Mid-Gulf and Easter’d been fired by them some years back. He’s kind of a professional sorehead. Anyway, somebody worked out this idea Easter might be mixed up in that wildcat strike, and that he and some more hotheads might have been trying to lay a mine in the channel for a Mid-Gulf tanker that came down that night. The only catch to this theory, of course, is the fact that Easter wasn’t in the boat. And if he’d hatched a deal like that he’d have been the one to do it.

“So you can see we’re not completely backward here. We can hatch as many theories as anybody. The only trouble is nobody’s ever found out yet just why the boat did blow up.”

Griffin stopped talking, and for a moment they were all silent. Another crazy thing that doesn’t make sense, Reno thought. Is that all they grow in this country? He looked across at Patricia Lasater. She was still strangely quiet and intent on her own thoughts, drawing aimless designs on the tablecloth with a spoon.

“Those men,” she said at last. “What I can’t get out of my mind is the fact that nobody ever missed them. Wasn’t there a car, or anything?”

“No,” Griffin said. “Nothing. The boat was gone, and that was all—” He broke off suddenly, looking at his watch. He whistled. “Girls, I’ve got to run. It’s H-hour, minus twenty minutes, and tonight’s dreamboat has been known to be ready on time.”

After he was gone the conversation lagged. There were long stretches of silence between them during dinner, and Reno sensed that she was deep in some not-too-happy preoccupation she could not throw off. He himself was conscious of an inability to get Griffin’s story out of his mind. There was

something about it that kept bothering him. But how could there be any connection between it and the baffling set of puzzles he was already involved in? Counsel hadn't come back until after the middle of July.

But that wasn't quite right. Hadn't he been through here sometime in May, when he arrived on the ship? Mrs. Conway had said it was in May they were married.

Explosives, Reno thought. That was what stuck in his mind. Counsel had been fascinated by explosives.

They walked back to the camp together in the warm velvet night. Outside her cabin they paused for a moment, and he was irritably conscious of some faint reluctance to leave her. Hell, he thought, let her go.

She said, "Goodnight. And thank you, Mr. Reno," rather quietly, and turned to go inside.

A deep restlessness had hold of him and he knew he would not sleep if he went to bed. All the old unanswered questions would come back to tear at the edges of his mind the moment he lay down. He would go down to the float and smoke a cigarette. He had started in that direction when he remembered he should open the door and the windows in the cabin to freshen it.

He stepped up on the porch and was feeling for the lock with the key when he thought he heard a sound inside. It was not repeated, and he shrugged off the idea as he opened the door and stepped inside. He clicked on the light, and stood looking, around in amazement and growing anger.

The cabin had been ransacked—and either by a novice or by someone in too big a hurry to take any pains to cover it up. The big cowhide bag had been slit open and clothes were scattered over the floor. In the same sweeping glance, he saw that the door going out into the kitchen was partly open. Snatching the flashlight off the dresser, he crossed the room and pushed the door inward, ready to swing. The kitchen was empty.

He swung about. The bathroom, he thought swiftly. But before he could take a step he heard a faint thud outside, behind the cabin. Running across the room, he hit the light switch and plunged the place into darkness as he shot through the doorway and onto the porch. He switched on the flashlight and as he cut around the corner he probed the darkness along the bank, knowing he was courting a shot if the intruder had a gun. The light encountered nothing but trees and the backs of the other cabins.

Turning, he threw the light out across the bayou in a sweeping arc. There was no sign of a boat. I must have imagined it, he decided. This place is giving me the jumps. The guy who was in there may have been gone for an hour.

Disgustedly, he walked back to the porch and went inside. He reached out for the light switch again with his left hand, seeing nothing but the beam of the flashlight ahead of him, and felt his hand stop abruptly against the sweaty shirt and the chest of a man standing beside him in the darkness.

There was nothing he could do about it then. The night tilted up at him like an opening cellar door.

## Ten

Why didn't they take off his headgear and relieve the pressure? His whole head was an immense, throbbing receptacle of pain, which was going to burst like a soap bubble with the next breath he took. He tried to open his eyes and look up at the circle of anxious faces that would be leaning over him, the officials and his teammates, Then he remembered. . . .

He tried to sit up and it hit him again, the stab of pain at the back of his head. It was a long time before he could get to his feet, clinging weakly to the doorframe, and then the vertigo and nausea swept over him again. When he got the light on he staggered into the bathroom and turned on the shower, collapsing onto his knees with his head under it. This is a stupid thing to do, he thought. If I pass out again, I'll drown. He let the water run, washing over him like a soothing spring rain.

When he got to his feet and turned off the water, the cut on his head was still bleeding a little, but he was able to feel it with his fingers and determine that it was not a bad one. Wrapping a towel about his head, he went into the other room.

Just how had it happened? The man had forced the bathroom window to get in—that much he knew, for the window was still open. And he had apparently ducked back into the bathroom when he heard the key in the lock. But what about the sound outside? Had he only imagined it, or had there been two of them?

He picked up the flashlight and went back outside, walking unsteadily and feeling the pain like a pressure inside his skull. Because he had an idea what he was looking for now, he threw the light on the ground and found it almost immediately. It was the soap dish from the bathroom, lying near the bayou's edge.

Suckered, he thought bitterly. By an old Indian trick like that. The man had been there in the bathroom all the time and, knowing he didn't have a chance of getting back out the window in time, had sailed the dish out to

create a diversion. A thing like that took cool nerves and a devilish intelligence.

Back inside the cabin, he looked grimly at his scattered belongings. The letter from the man in the FBI was still inside the pocket in the ripped suitcase. Had the prowler read it and put it back? As far as he could see, nothing had been stolen. Somebody was looking for information, he thought; and the sad part of it is I don't know how much he got.

He took the letter into the kitchen and burned it in the stove, swearing silently at himself because he hadn't done it before. This was poor country in which to get careless.

\* \* \*

It was after sunrise of a hot, brilliant morning when he awoke. His head was better, but sunlight stabbed at his eyes and started it aching again. He put on a straw hat and went fishing anyway. Maybe he wasn't fooling anybody now, but he couldn't give up.

It could have been anybody, he thought. I had my hands on him, and all I know is that his shirt was wet with sweat. That and the fact that he was smart and had nerves like ice to wait me out. That would fit Counsel. . . . He shrugged irritably. Robert Counsel couldn't have been here all this time unless he was dead. He would have been seen and recognized.

What about the Lasater girl; where did she fit in? There was no doubt, of course, that she could have followed him over to the Counselor to act as a decoy to keep him there while the man shook down his cabin. But had she? He was only guessing. He recalled the strange silence that had fallen over her while Griffin talked about the explosion. It obviously wasn't the first time she'd heard the story, but still it fascinated her.

Thinking about it now, he remembered his own odd feeling about it, the illogical hunch that it could be somehow connected with the mystery in which he was already entangled. There was no basis for it except that it had been an explosion and Gage had said Counsel was an explosives expert. But still, Counsel could have been here then. He'd returned from Italy about that time.

He abruptly reeled in his lure and rowed back to camp. Mildred Talley was lying on the float in her bathing suit. She propped herself on one elbow

and waved with a cigarette.

"Hello," she said. "How are the bass and all the little bass?"

"Feeling no pain. At least, not from hunger," he replied, tying up the skiff.

She smiled. "If you really want to catch the silly things, you ought, to go along with Max Easter. He never has any trouble."

He looked at her curiously. "He doesn't?"

"Not from what I hear—" She stopped abruptly and sat up. Reno looked up the path. Delia Malone had come out of the kitchen and was staring coldly at the girl.

"Oh, oh, I'd better get to work," Mildred said, climbing to her feet. "Dell's on the warpath this morning."

Delia's jumped her about talking too much, Reno decided as he changed clothes. He remembered Skeeter's purring drawl: "If you can't shut her big mouth, I can." But talking about what? Most of her conversation appeared to be harmless.

Easter was a good fisherman; so what of it? She was a bird brain. But maybe that was the trouble—they didn't know what she would talk about.

Delia was alone at the counter. She took his order with cold efficiency and as she departed for the kitchen Reno pulled the morning paper toward him. He unfolded it, and Vickie's picture leaped up at him from the front page. "Actress Near Collapse," the headlines read. "Maintains Innocence." His eyes were bleak as he skimmed through the lead. They couldn't leave her alone; they had to have more pictures and more rehash of the same old story. "In a highly charged and dramatic interview in the city jail today, Vickie Shane McHugh, radio and motion-picture actress held in connection with the August tenth slaying of her husband, tearfully reiterated her innocence."

The screen door opened and closed. Reno looked around. It was Patricia Lasater, disturbingly good-looking in a summery cotton and spectator pumps. She smiled when she saw him, and sat down on a stool away at the counter. He was grudgingly conscious of the fact that her smile was a distillation of pure charm, the velvety brown eyes just faintly bantering and amused and yet full of warmth and fringed with the longest and darkest lashes he had ever seen.

So she's pretty, he thought, instantly savage. Isn't that nice? Why don't I tell her she's a cute little thing and we can organize a club and just forget about everything else?

His face expressionless, he slid the paper along the counter toward her.

"Here," he said. "I was just looking at the headlines."

"Thank you," she murmured politely.

"They really got that actress dead to rights," he went on. "She hasn't got a prayer."

She glanced down at the picture, and when she looked up he saw her face had gone suddenly still. "Do you think they'll convict her?" she asked anxiously.

"Sure." He gestured with offhand confidence. "It's open and shut. She drops in on her husband, finds him wandering into the hotel with some stray dish, and blasts him. She might get off with life, but I doubt it."

"But I think she's innocent—"

"Innocent?" he scoffed. "Fat chance. With the motive she had? She caught her husband playing around, didn't she?"

There was something trapped and desperate in the brown eyes now, and she looked away from him. "But maybe it wasn't the way it looked, at all," she protested.

He turned the knife, suddenly and inexplicably detesting himself for doing it. "Well, all I can say is that she's going to have a sweet time proving it. It's obvious what it was, the way this good-time babe ducked out and left the country."

She made an effort to regain control of herself now, and she said coldly, "You are quite definite in your opinions, aren't you, Mr. Reno? Are you always as sure of everything?"

He shrugged. I had her going there for a minute, he thought grimly. Then he felt very little pride in it. Something was bothering her, and he had the feeling there was a lot here he hadn't seen yet.

"No," he answered. "There are a few things I'm not sure of. Are you going to town this morning?"

"Why, yes."

"I'm going in for a couple of hours, if you'd like a ride. No use taking both cars."

She considered it briefly, and her tone thawed to its accustomed friendliness as she accepted. Maybe I'm being stupid, he thought, as they went out onto the highway. Maybe I'm doing it all wrong. What I ought to do is pull right in front of the police station and take her in. She could skip.

No, he decided impatiently. He was up against the same old argument. If he turned her over to the police and she refused to verify Vickie's story his sister would be in a worse position than ever, and he would be exposed. They'd know who he was, and he didn't need a blueprint to see what that could mean.

Once, during a long period of silence, he turned his head and looked at her. The lovely face was troubled, as she stared moodily ahead at the road. Is that the only reason I don't take her in, he wondered, or am I getting soft in the head?

She turned, and caught him looking at her. The brown eyes were a little flustered as she tried to smile.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. "Did you say something? I was thinking."

"Yeah." He faced the road again. "Yeah. So was I." Counsel and Easter weren't the only explosives experts in this part of the country. There was just a touch of dynamite about this dark-haired girl.

It was a little after ten when he parked near the post office. "Meet you here at twelve-thirty," he said shortly. "All right?"

"Yes. That will do nicely," she said..

He started into the post office, but halted before he was up the steps. There wouldn't have been time to receive a letter from Mrs. Conway. Maybe she hadn't even reached San Francisco yet; at any rate it might be another two or three days before he heard. He turned away with disappointment and started toward Gage's office.

Nuts, he thought, I might as well try, now that I'm here. Ducking into a drugstore telephone booth, he put through the call to San Francisco, listening anxiously while the long-distance operator asked Information for the number. Then he heard the telephone ringing. There was just a chance, a slight chance, she had arrived and hadn't left yet.

Then his heart leaped eagerly as he heard her answer with a sleepy voice. It wasn't until then that he realized it was only a little after eight on the Coast and that he'd got her out of bed.

“Oh,” she said quickly, when she learned who it was. “Have, you—I mean, is there anything new?”

“No. Not yet.” He was sorry for her. She knew her husband had married her under an alias, and that he was either dead or he had tried to kill her, but still she couldn’t quit hoping. “I wanted to ask something,” he went on. “Do you remember the date Mr. Conway arrived in Waynesport when he came back from Italy?”

“Why, yes,” she said slowly. “It was around the first week in May, I think.”

“But you don’t know the exact day?”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t think he ever said—”

“How about the name of the ship?”

“Yes, I know that, if I can just think of it. Wait . . .” He could tell she was trying to concentrate. She was still dull from sleep. “It was the Silver something. Silver, ah Silver Cape. That’s it. Why, Mr. Reno?”

“Just a wild idea,” he said. “I’m still grabbing at straws.”

“You’ll let me know, won’t you? I’ll be at Carmel.” She gave him the address.

“Yes,” he said. “The first thing.”

The public library was a small ivy-covered building on a quiet street asleep under its trees. He asked for and received the bound copies of the *Waynesport Express* for May, and sat down alone at a table. Beginning at the first, he began skipping through the pages, skipping over to the back of each paper where the shipping news was carried. By the time he had progressed as far as May seventh without success he was growing tense.

The ship did not arrive on the eighth, or ninth, and as he opened the paper for May tenth, hope was dying. He hurriedly scanned the ship arrivals, and sat back in defeat. There was no mention of the Silver Cape.

Another hare-brained idea shot to hell, he thought. There wasn’t any connection. Robert Counsel was still at sea when the explosion took place. Automatically, and without interest, he went on to the following paper. And there it was.

The SS Silver Cape, inbound from Genoa, Marseilles, and Barcelona, had berthed at Weaver Terminal at 1:30 A.M. So what? He wearily asked himself. That was May eleventh, the day after the explosion. No. He sat up, suddenly alert. Griffin had said the tenth, but it was after midnight. He

flipped eagerly back to the front page. There was no need to look for it; the headline shouted! “Mysterious Blast Demolishes Boat.”

He hurriedly skimmed through the story and the follow-up news in subsequent papers. It was essentially as Griffin had told it. Experts said the explosion had come from inside the boat. There was no clue as to the cause. Two men were believed to have been aboard, but their identities were a complete mystery. Griffin was quoted as having no idea who had stolen the craft.

He quietly closed the binder and sat there for a moment in the hush of the reading room, his face showing none of his furious intensity of thought. The whole thing could be a coincidence. It almost had to be. How could Counsel have caused the blast? He was on the ship, and he couldn't have got off until after he had been through customs later in the morning, long after the explosion. But still the ship had gone up the channel just before the boat blew up.

It's there somewhere, he thought, feeling the goadings of helpless anger. This whole rotten mess fits together like a prefabricated birdhouse, if I just had the key. Mac had it, and they killed him. For just a few minutes, or maybe less, he had the answer to all of it, and then they got him because he'd found out too much. Why can't I see it if he did?

And, he wondered coldly, would he have any more warning than Mac had, if he did find it? He started over to Gage's office.

He was approaching the entrance to one of the banks when he slowed abruptly. Patricia Lasater had just emerged from the doorway. She did not see him, and now she stood in the center of the sidewalk looking uncertainly about her. Then she turned as if she had found what she sought, and started walking away from him. She stopped at a pickup truck that had pulled to the curb. The door opened, and a big man climbed out. It was Max Easter, dressed in khaki trousers and a cotton undershirt.

They were no more than fifteen yards away. Reno leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette, watching them speculatively. She took something from her handbag and handed it to Easter. Reno could see it quite plainly—it was money. For moving a trailer, he wondered coldly, or for shaking down my cabin and slugging me with a sap? Or is he putting the squeeze on her?

Easter took the bills, shoved them carelessly into his pocket, and made a gesture with his other hand that was part acknowledgement and partly a farewell chopped off with curt insolence as he turned abruptly away from her and started up the sidewalk toward Reno. When Easter came abreast, Reno turned and looked squarely at him. It was the first time he had seen him at close range, and he marked the well-shaped head, the short, iron-gray hair, and the cold, deep-set pale eyes.

As he went past, Easter turned his head and their eyes met. There was no recognition in them, but Reno could feel the hair tingle at the back of his neck. This could be the man. He could be the one who had killed Mac, who had shot at him and Mrs. Conway with the rifle . . . Then he was gone.

Howell Gage looked up from the brief he was reading and waved toward a chair. "Anything new?" he asked.

"Nothing any good. I walked in on somebody going through my gear, and got sapped." He related the story briefly.

Gage's eyes were thoughtful. "He may know who you are. If he does, you're a bum risk."

Reno shrugged. "I don't think he's sure yet. There wasn't anything to prevent him from finishing the job then."

"He might be waiting."

"For what?"

"I don't know. But you're taking chances."

"Never mind that." Reno jerked an impatient hand. "Tell me what you know about Max Easter."

"Uh-uh." Gage shook his head slowly. "I think you're on the wrong track. Easter's as big as a horse, and he dresses like a tramp. He couldn't have got in and out of the Boardman without being noticed by somebody."

"I know," Reno agreed reluctantly. "But then it wouldn't have been easy for anybody, and we know somebody did. What do you know about him?"

"Not too much. Except that he's a bad one to fool with. Has a reputation for being radical and a troublemaker, but keeps pretty much to himself. Don't think he works any more. Lives out there on the bayou in a houseboat. Guides duck hunters in winter, and probably does a little commercial fishing."

"What about this scuttlebutt that Counsel ran off with his wife?"

Gage lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair, staring thoughtfully at the lighter. "I see what you're driving at. But it may be only a rumor; nobody ever knew for sure. Easter's not the confidential type."

"When was it?"

"Just before Counsel was drafted, in forty-two. He'd have been oh, twenty-three, I think. Easter was working at the Mid-Gulf refinery then, as I remember, and hadn't been married more than a year or so. I never met his wife, but saw her once or twice. Nice-looking kid with big, serious eyes, but a lot younger than Easter. He must have been around forty, even then. Anyway, Mrs. Easter disappeared, along in June, I think it was. And Counsel was gone, too. There was talk they'd been seen together here and there, and then of course there was the inevitable story that somebody ran across them in New Orleans or Miami at some hotel. You've probably heard of Counsel's reputation with the women. He was smooth, and he had a way with them.

"And about that time Easter got in trouble at Mid-Gulf. I don't know whether he was drinking or not, but it was pretty messy, from what they say. Got in a fight with his foreman and damn near killed him. He was fired, of course, and as far as I know he's never worked at anything since. People leave him pretty much alone except duck hunters and fishermen who persuade him to guide them now and then. Have to catch him in the right mood, or he might not even answer you."

"His wife never came back?" Reno asked.

"No. At least, nobody's ever seen her."

"But Counsel did show up again?"

"In a way. He was here for maybe a day and a half. He'd received his induction notice, and had to show up. Then he was shipped out."

Reno stared thoughtfully out into the sun-blasted street. It tied in, that way. Maybe Easter didn't know Counsel'd returned in forty-two until he was gone again. Then he had to wait nine years for another chance. And it was easy to see why Counsel had tried to slip in without being seen. But why had he come back at all? He had nothing to gain, and he knew he might be killed if Easter saw him. The puzzle wasn't all there yet.

"Where is this houseboat of his?" he asked.

"I'm not sure I can tell you how to find it. I've been up there two or three times duck-hunting, but it's tricky. Starting out from Malone's

deadfall, you turn off to the right at that first arm of the bayou going north. It's about three miles, and the bayou forks several times. If I remember correctly, you take the left-hand fork the first time, and then the next two you go to the right."

"Thanks," Reno. Said. He stood up.

"But listen, Pete. Your sister's already lost a husband."

"Yes?"

"Yes. She couldn't take another shock like that. Don't monkey with Easter unless you know what you're doing, and have the police with you."

"It's all right." Reno paused with his hand on the door, and looked back at the young lawyer without expression. "I'm just going to hire a guide."

"Remember, he may know who you are."

"Yes," Reno said softly. "And maybe I know who he is."

## Eleven

She was not at the car when he arrived. He looked at his watch and grunted. It was 12:30. Ten minutes went by while he fretted impatiently. When she did arrive she was hurrying and out of breath.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I had some business that took a little longer than I’d expected.”

“It’s all right,” he said shortly, as they got in the car.

They were both deep in thought and spoke little during the drive back. She thanked him quietly and went into her cabin.

Reno changed into fishing clothes and went down to the float with rod and tackle box to pick out a skiff. There was no whisper of breeze and the bayou lay flat and glaring like polished steel between the walls of trees. The sun beat relentlessly on his back and shoulders, and before he had rounded the first turn his clothes were dripping with perspiration. There was no other boat in sight. When he came abreast the arm of the bayou that ran off toward the north, he turned in. The channel was narrower here.

He looked back over his shoulder from time to time to check his course, keeping as close as possible to the bank and the overhanging trees to take advantage of the shade. He could be a thousand miles from civilization here, he thought.

He had no definite plan, nor any idea of what he might find. He was drawn merely by the fact that all the information he uncovered led him more surely in the direction of Max Easter. Suppose Counsel’s dead, he thought. It almost had to be Easter who killed him. He had the motive. He was here on the bayou, and he’d been waiting a long time.

He stopped pulling the oars for a minute and looked out through the trees as he lit a cigarette, conscious of a nagging dissatisfaction that he could not escape. There were two weak places in this line of reasoning. In the first place, he didn’t know Counsel was dead. It was just a guess, even if a good, logical one. And secondly, he was no nearer to answering the most

baffling question of all and the one that had to be the key to the whole thing: what had Counsel come back for? Not just to see if Easter would kill him—that was a cinch.

He shook his head and took up the oars again. At least he could get a good look at the big man at close range. And if it developed he hadn't come back from town yet . . . His eyes were tough as he thought of the houseboat. Easter, or somebody, hadn't been squeamish about shaking down his cabin. It could work both ways.

He pulled steadily, and in about twenty minutes he came to the first fork in the waterway. He took the left-hand channel, as Gage had directed, and mentally noted an old snag as a landmark for the return trip. It would be easy to get lost up here. He wondered how Easter came and went; then he remembered the pickup truck. There must be a road that came nearer to the houseboat somewhere above.

There was none here, however, nor even any trails along the banks. He must have come two miles or a little more by this time, moving in a generally northwesterly direction.

He came to the second fork and stopped rowing to look about him. Go to the right here, he thought. The right-hand channel was narrow, not more than twenty yards across and almost a tunnel under the overhanging trees, while the other was wider and ran straight ahead for another two hundred yards before it swung left around a bend.

Reno wondered for a moment if Gage had meant what he had assumed: right hand facing forward. A man rowing a boat is traveling backward, but that would normally be disregarded in giving directions . . . He shrugged. Gage was no fool, and he had been in boats before.

He was about to take up the oars again when he suddenly jerked his head erect and looked around, trying to identify and locate the sound he had heard. It was not a gun. The muffled roar of it was too deep for that. And where had it come from?

He swung around in the skiff, facing forward, and saw nothing but the empty reach of the bayou shimmering in the sun. The dead, lost-world silence of the swamp closed in again, and he could hear his own breathing as he listened. It was an explosion of some kind, he thought, completely mystified. But it wasn't a big blast, and it had come from not very far away."

Then the sound came again. This time there was a string of three, evenly spaced, about five seconds apart. They came from somewhere up the larger, left-hand channel. There was no mistaking the direction now. He dug in the oars and began pulling swiftly toward-the bend up ahead.

Somebody blowing stumps out of a field, or clearing right of way for a road? Road? He thought. Field? There was neither within miles. They used bulldozers now, anyway.

He came around the bend, swung his head expectantly, and saw nothing. This stretch of waterway was as devoid of life and movement as all the others. Less than a hundred yards ahead there was another turn, to the right this time. He rowed on.

He was rounding the turn now, and started to swing his head around to look. He heard the vicious *splatt!* As the bullet slammed against the water and went whining off into the distance, and he was already off the seat and diving over the side before he heard the sound of the gun itself.

He came to the surface, gulped a breath, and before he could get the water out of his eyes and look around the second bullet threw up a geyser of swamp water two feet off to his left. He went under, pulling downward and to the right. His movements were hampered by clothing and shoes, and he wondered if he could make it to the screen of overhanging limbs along the bank before he had to surface. It shouldn't be more than thirty feet.

He felt leaves brush his hands, and surfaced. He was in deep shadow, and there was no shot. The man, wherever he was up the bayou, couldn't see him here. Softly turning his head, he looked out through the leaves. Except for his skiff the bayou lay deserted under the glare of the sun. The shots had come as mysteriously out of nowhere as the explosions he had heard. He looked back at the boat. It was rocking gently and drifting a little.

He was shooting from somewhere pretty far up this reach of bayou, Reno thought bitterly. And it wasn't any twenty-two rifle. That was high-velocity stuff, the way it churned up the water before I heard the shot. I've got to get out of here before he gets any nearer with that gun.

He caught a projected root and pulled himself up the bank. His body brushed against the stem of a bush, shaking it a little, and almost immediately there was the ominous scream of another flattened bullet tearing off into the timber. A severed twig floated down onto his head.

Too damn close, he thought, as he made it onto the bank and .dropped behind a log.

He swung his head and looked back toward the channel. His view down the long reach was cut off by the trees, but he could see straight out toward the other side and he could see the skiff. There was something strange about it, something he had half noticed before and had had no time to consider then.

Never mind that, he thought. If that guy's coming down this side with his rifle I'm a dead pigeon if I don't fade, but fast. The best thing to do is head back along the bank. He raised up a little to study the cover he would have. Except for the area right near the bank, it was open timber, big trees and lots of them, but little underbrush. Getting to his feet with a quick lunge, he started to run to his right, paralleling the bank. Water sloshed noisily in his shoes. He had hurtled forward less than a dozen strides when he heard the gun crash again. He threw himself down and rolled behind the uprooted earth of a fallen tree.

Closer, he thought, gasping for breath. A lot closer, and it was a different gun. There were two of them. One was covering the open reach of the bayou, and the other was running down this side looking for him. And they knew he didn't have a gun. All they had to do was move in and pick him off. He couldn't even hide, because they could track him by the trail of water his soaked clothes were leaving. He felt goose flesh rise and prickle between his shoulder blades as his mind flashed crazily back to the thing that Gage had said: "Your sister's already lost a husband."

He turned his head and looked swiftly behind him, out across the channel. The boat was still there. It was a desperate gamble, but if he stayed where he was he had no chance at all. He was on the point of land where the channel made its bend, and the man was behind him. There was nothing left but the water.

Again, in that brief and chilling second in which he considered his chances, he was conscious of the thing that had bothered him about the boat. And this time he knew what it was—the boat was rocking.

Now that he understood, he heard the *slup, slup* of small waves coming in against the bank. In this absolutely breathless calm? There was nothing to cause even a ripple on the water.

But there was no time to think about it. He slid backward and eased down the bank into the water, feeling his skin draw up tight as he expected the bullet to come crashing into him every second. There was no telling where the man was now. Just before he went under completely, he took a big breath and turned to mark the exact position of the boat.

He swam straight out, trying to stay far enough off the bottom not to stir the mud and give himself away to the man on the shore. If he missed the boat, he would have to try to make the other side before one of them could get here with their boat. They must have one up above somewhere. He'd have to surface to get his breath, but if he did it fast enough he might succeed. It would take a lightening fast shot to line up a rifle and squeeze off the trigger in that brief second. Getting out on the other side without being killed, however, would be something else.

He turned on his side and opened his eyes. He kicked ahead three more strokes and swung his face, searching, feeling a terrible urgency now. His breath was almost, gone. Then he saw the skiff, ten feet over to his left. He kicked again, and was under it.

Easy—take it easy, he thought, his lungs bursting. It would do no good to come up on the far side. The man up the bayou would be able to see him. And he couldn't bump it, make it move suddenly. He had his fingertips up, brushing the bottom. With agonizing care he felt his way along until he found what he sought. His fingers were out of the water, but still under the boat.

With no one aboard, it rode high forward, the prow and some two feet of sloping flat bottom rising a little above the surface. With the tips of his fingers he caught the thin strip of wood running lengthwise under the center of the floor planking and slowly pulled up until his nose was against the bottom in the air space between boat and surface. He took two deep breaths, almost sobbing in the relief to his lungs. Then a small wave slapped water into his nostrils, making them sting. He choked, but remained silent.

Neither of them could see him here. They would have to be down on the exact level of the water to see this far back under the overhang of the prow. But how long could he fool them? They would know he had gone back into the water.

The boat was rocking very gently now. The mysterious disturbance on the water was dying out, the surface returning to its waxed and glaring

calm. And now for the first time, when he had an instant in which to consider it, he knew what had caused it. Those explosions had been set off on the water, or under it—that was obvious. Somewhere farther up the bayou, probably around the next bend. But why? A demolition job on something blocking the channel? The hell, he thought; this wasn't a navigable waterway. Nobody ever used it.

He choked again, and pushed his nose a little farther out of the water. It was increasingly difficult to hold his position here, painfully clenching the tips of his fingers on the narrow batten. He tentatively lowered his feet. Maybe he could touch bottom. . . . He felt nothing.

He wasn't going to be able to remain here much longer. There had been no further shot, and he wondered whether the man along the bank had given up the chase. There was another possibility, he thought. Maybe they knew where he was and were only keeping him pinned down until they finished whatever they were doing. He felt a curious but impotent anger at not being able to find out what it was. Charges of explosive were sometimes set off like that to raise the body when someone had been lost in a river or lake. Sure, he thought bitterly, and with a goon squad standing guard with high-powered rifles?

It was maddening. If he could make it to the other side and lose himself in the timber he might be able to flank them and get a look at the bayou beyond the next bend. Whatever it was had happened right in that area. He was sure of it now. He turned his head slightly to the side so one eye was above water, and critically lined up the nearest point on the other shore. He could make it. He had to. Somehow, he had to know what was up there. Swinging back so his nose was above water again, he inhaled deeply, and swam down and away from the boat.

He had reckoned without the drag of his clothing and shoes, but that did not become apparent until too late. It was easy at first. He kicked and pulled steadily, warning himself not to hurry or to think of the man back there with the rifle. Then he swam head on into an underwater snag, which confused him momentarily and threw him disastrously off his stroke. He had to surface for air. His head came out and he gulped raggedly. He heard no shot as he pulled himself down again. But the man, if he were still there, hadn't been expecting him. The next time he'd be ready.

The shoes were growing heavier; they were like anchors on his feet. With every kick they dragged and sank a little more. He had been near to drowning twice in his life, and he knew the sensation, the unreasoning fear of water that begins to blot out everything and ends in blind and threshing panic. He fought it off grimly. The shore couldn't be far now. He had to breathe again. His head came clear at last, with a terrible effort, and he gasped. He floundered helplessly on the surface for a moment before he could force himself to submerge again, and this time he heard the bullet's *whupp!* And its lethal snarl as it went on.

He had to get back to the surface and its life-giving air. Terror was beginning to drive him up. Better to let the man try with his gun than to strangle here in this endless murky water. His arms and legs were growing weaker and trying to curl inward against him with the cramps of utter exhaustion. He struggled, biting his teeth together savagely to keep from gasping as his feet settled lower and lower. Then he felt his arms and face plow into brush. He felt nothing except the insubstantial and terrifying rake of limbs, and when he tried to raise his head there was something across his neck. He was trapped. He gulped, strangled, and began to black out.

In the dark mist of dying he felt himself threshing futilely against entangling brush and against the endless water. Somehow there was the noise of a gun mixed up in it, and splashing, and strange soft arms about his throat, and a voice pleading.

“Don't fall. Please, please, please, don't fall!”

## Twelve

Somehow his feet were under him. He had no strength, and lunged forward and fell, choking on the water he had swallowed. He felt hands tugging at him, and heard the same imploring voice at his ear, urging him on. He was up again, clawing at the bank. Something came out of nowhere and slammed into the damp soil, exploding it in a shower all about him. Then he was over the bank. He stumbled and fell again, dimly conscious that somebody else was at his side and falling with him.

He lay for a moment, his shoulders heaving as he sobbed for breath. He opened his eyes and the wildness and the dark mist were going away. His face was against cloth and warmth, and when he turned his head wonderingly he was looking into frightened and anxious brown eyes very close to his own. She had fallen on her side, with his head held against her.

“Are you all right?” she gasped.

He turned and stared incredulously in the other direction. The far shore was invisible beyond the screen of foliage protecting them, but he could see projecting out into the water the old windfall in which he had been entangled. Patricia Lasater had gone out there and pulled him free while the man shot at them.

He sat up and tried to get to his feet. He was still too weak, and his legs were rubbery.

“Are you sure you’re all right? She asked again.

“Yes,” he said. “You haven’t got a gun, have you?” He was vaguely conscious that this was a stupid question to ask.

“No.” She stood up. Her white blouse and the brief shorts were soaked and there was a scratch on one of her legs just above the knee. She caught his arm as he stood up. “This way,” she said breathlessly, pointing down the channel. “Run. I heard a boat—up there.”

The roaring was going out of his head now and he was beginning to think again. He knew what she meant. The other man had crossed over and

would be coming down this side with his rifle.

She ran swiftly, and at first he had difficulty keeping up. In a moment he began to get his breath back and came up alongside her, helping her with a hand on her arm. Now and then he looked back over his shoulder as they raced through the timber.

She began to tire. She stumbled once and would have fallen, but he caught her. They stopped at last and sank to the ground in a mass of ferns while they sobbed for breath.

“It’s—not much farther,” she gasped.

“What?”

“My boat. Just below—the bend.”

“The motor on it?”

She nodded, too winded to speak again. Reno came up to his knees and swiftly searched the forest behind them. There was no movement. A jay sat on a limb above them and scolded raucously. Stool pigeon, he thought grimly. Time to move.

“Can you make it now?” he asked gently.

She merely nodded, and started pulling herself up. He helped her. The bend of the bayou was off to their left, then behind them as they approached the channel below it. She ran ahead now, searching for the boat.

It was well hidden, tied up under overhanging limbs. “Get in,” he commanded. “And lie down. I’ll handle the motor.”

She started to protest, but after a glance at his face she obeyed. He took one last look; behind them, untied the anchor rope, swung the bow outward, and climbed on the stern. It’d better catch the first time, he thought. They’ll hear it.

The motor coughed. He pulled again; it caught this time and lifted its popping roar above the stillness. They slid out into the channel, turned sharply, and began to gather speed. He pulled the throttle wide, his back feeling icy. They were out in the open now, sitting ducks if either of the men had made it as far as the bend. Seconds dragged by and there was no shot. They rounded the next bend in the channel and he breathed again, the tension running out of him.

She sat up in the middle seat, facing him, and ran an unsteady hand through her dark curls. Noticing how the blouse was plastered against her, she attempted to pull it away, faintly embarrassed. She had mud on one

cheek and on her chin, and traces of bayou scum on her forearms. Reno looked briefly at her and then at the channel ahead, wondering when he had seen a girl as mussed—or as beautiful in spite of it. Neither of them said anything. The motor made too much noise.

A mile of twisting waterway fled astern, and then another. They were beyond the last fork now, almost back to the main arm of the bayou and the camp. They were safe. Abruptly, he cut the motor and let the boat drift to a stop in the shade near overhanging trees along the bank. He caught a limb and held it. The bayou stretched out deserted and quiet ahead of them.

She looked at him questioningly.

“We’re all right now,” he said. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

“What is that?”

“Thanks.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

He shook his head. “I wasn’t trying to be funny. I’m just not very good with words.”

She looked gravely at his face and then away. “Anyone would have done it.”

“Under fire? Those weren’t blanks they were shooting.”

“Yes. I know. But I tried not to think about them.”

After they made this kid, he thought, they threw away the plans and broke up the molds. Even with swamp on her face she looks like something you’d run into in a dream, and she’s got a system about being shot at. Keep busy and don’t think about it.

“Look,” he said at last, “you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but how did you happen to be there?”

She studied the bottom of the boat. “Could we call it just luck?”

He felt the sharp stab of disappointment, but waited a moment before answering. When she looked up again and their eyes met, he said, “Yes. I’ll tell you how it is, Pat. After what’s just happened, we call it anything you say.”

“Thank you. In that case, I’ll amend it. It wasn’t all luck.”

“No?”

“No. I was following you.”

“Why?”

She answered slowly, “I was looking for something.”

“What?”

This time she waited a long time before replying. “I’d rather not say now, if you don’t mind. Not yet, anyway.”

“Did you find it, whatever it was?”

“I’m not sure.”

She’ll tell me when she’s ready, he thought. I can’t rush her.

“I didn’t hear your motor. Or see you.”

“I was using the oars. And staying way back.”

“Did you hear those explosions? Just before they shot at me the first time?”

She nodded.

“You have any idea at all what they were?”

“No. It sounded like dynamite, but rather muffled.”

“That’s right,” he said. “I’m almost certain they were I set off under water. But you don’t know who could have done it? Or why?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head in bewilderment. “I was hoping to find out, the same as you were. But apparently whoever was doing it had other ideas.”

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

She stared at him. “I’ve noticed that about a number of things around here.” Then she added, “But I think we’d better go on. I’d like to change clothes, and put some iodine on this scratch.”

“Oh.” He reached back to start the motor. “I’m sorry. Does it hurt?”

“Not much. But I’d like to attend to it.”

When they pulled up at the float there was no one around. Shadows were lengthening now, and dark tranquil water mirrored the timber along the other shore. She stepped out and started to turn toward the path while he made the skiff fast. Then she paused.

He looked up. The brown eyes were regarding him with a disconcerting levelness. “I almost forgot,” she said quietly. “There was something I wanted to tell you.”

“What?”

“That good-time floozie you were so humorous about this morning—”

It caught him off guard. He could only stare.

“I thought you might like to know. She turned herself in to the police today.” Swinging about, she started up the path.

“Wait,” he called. But she was gone.

He caught her as she was passing his cabin. “I’ve got to talk to you.”

“Yes?” she said coolly.

“Yes. It’s important.”

She relented then. “All right. In about a half hour.”

He changed into dry clothing and shaved without knowing what he did. His thoughts ran futilely after a hundred questions at once. If she had gone to the police maybe that would take the pressure off Vickie. Wouldn’t that explode their so-called motive? Couldn’t they see it? But why had she waited all these days? It was obvious she had wanted to before this. And what about the trailer? And Easter? Who was she, and what was she looking for? She’ll tell me; she’ll clear it up.

When she came out of her cabin the short curls had been restored to their casual symmetry and to the dull gleam of polished ebony. She had changed to a white cotton dress and gilt sandals, but the smooth tanned legs were stockingless. She was fresh and sweet and very disturbing as she stepped down from the porch. She did not smile, however; the large eyes were quite serious.

He helped her into the car and got behind the wheel. “Would you go up past the Counselor?” she asked as they came out onto the highway. “I’d like to show you something.”

They went past it. She said nothing. A quarter mile beyond, as they neared a dirt road leading off to the right, she nodded, and he turned into it, wondering. The only thing in this direction was the ship channel, and there wouldn’t be a bridge—not on this road. In a few minutes they came to the end of it. There was only a field, off to their left, and the dark line of trees along the waterway. He stopped, and it was not until then that he saw, the scars of torn limbs and trunks that disfigured a pair of huge live oaks directly ahead over the edge of the water.

He turned and looked at her. “This was where it was?” It was as if the thing he had sensed before was now a certainty—that there was some dark link between her and that boat explosion.

“Yes,” she said simply.

He handed her a cigarette and lit it. She had turned a little on the seat and was facing him. “Do you want to tell me about it?” he asked.

Instead of answering his question, she asked quietly, "Mr. McHugh was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"Yes," he said. Something told him that everything had to be out in the open between him and this girl now and from this time onward. "He was the best friend I ever had. And Vickie Shane's my sister."

She nodded. "I should have guessed it before, I suppose. This morning, when you—"

"I'm sorry about that," he interrupted. "But, you see, it was an act. I was fishing. I thought you might be the girl, but I still wasn't sure."

"Yes. I sensed that somehow, but it hit home anyway, because I deserved it. I know it's a little late now to tell you this, but the only thing I can say in my defense is that I had no intention at all of leaving the country until I had gone, to the District Attorney and told him. But I was praying for time. I was desperate for just a few more days."

"You don't have to explain," Reno said grimly. "I know what you mean. As soon as word got out that you were connected with McHugh in any way, or even knew him, time would be something you might run out of in a hurry."

Her face was unhappy. "That's it. Mr. McHugh believed—and I did, too—that there was some strange connection between the disappearances, some terrible thing we hadn't even guessed—"

"Wait," Reno broke in, his head jerking erect at her use of the plural. "You mean there was another one? Besides Conway?"

"Yes." She took a puff on the cigarette and turned to look out across the blasted trees and the ship channel. "There was another one." There was an infinite weariness in her tone.

Then she appeared to gather herself up, and went on, "But I'm trying to show you why I kept putting off going to the District Attorney. I was terrified. Suppose there was some connection, that it was all part of something terrible that we didn't know about? He'd been killed, and if I went to the police it might get in the papers. I'd be exposed, with no place to hide; and even if the same man didn't kill me, I'd never find out what I was trying to. Don't you see, Mr. Reno?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "I see, all right. And, incidentally, my name is Pete." Then he added, "But you did go to the police today. Why?"

"I don't know, actually. I guess I just couldn't stand it any longer. I mean, knowing what Miss Shane was going through there all alone and that I was withholding the little help I could give her."

"I don't know whether you sit up nights worrying about my opinion," he said. "But you're all right, in my book." Then he asked, "What happened? Today, I mean."

"I went to the police first," she said. "And talked to Lieutenant Wayland. He took me in to see the District Attorney. I told them about calling Mr. McHugh at his hotel that night and how he had met me in the lobby. I had something to tell him, so we walked around for a while, and then we sat on a bench over in the park for about an hour, talking about it—"

"Just a minute," Reno interrupted. "What was it you told McHugh?"

"That I'd just come from the library, from looking up something in the back copies of the paper, and that I'd found out the ship this man Conway came back from Italy on had gone up the channel—"

"Just before Griffin's boat blew up," Reno finished softly.

She looked at him, startled. "How did you know?"

"I looked it up too. There's one thing about all this mess—sooner or later you always get back to Counsel. But never mind that," he went on quickly. "What did the District Attorney say? Maybe this will change their tune."

She shook her head with regret. "I'm sorry, Pete. I'm not sure they even believed me."

"Didn't believe you?" he asked angrily. "Don't they know you'll make the same statement on the stand? And that if Vickie knew who you were and why you were there, what they call a motive is nothing but eyewash?"

"Yes, I know, Pete. But consider the way they're looking at it. They have only my word for it. And they can still claim Miss Shane didn't know who I was or didn't believe it when she was told. And there's all the other evidence. The only thing I really hoped was that they'd start looking into it from the angle of Conway's—or Counsel's—disappearance, before it's too late, but I don't know . . ." Her voice trailed off hopelessly.

She's right, he thought bitterly. It might raise a reasonable doubt, at the trial itself, but the only way I'll ever clear Vickie for good is to find the man who did it.

He turned away from his bleak contemplation of the ship channel and looked at her. "Let's forget my troubles for the moment, Pat," he said. "You were going to tell me how you got mixed up in this. And who is this other man who disappeared?"

"Two other men," she corrected.

"Two?" he asked incredulously. "Who were they? And when?"

She crushed out her cigarette in the ash tray. "One of them was my brother."

"When?" he asked again, very softly, but he was afraid he already knew.

"The last word I ever received from him was a post card mailed from Waynesport on May ninth."

## Thirteen

He said nothing for a moment as he sat looking at the neat and well-ordered and utterly terrible beauty of the way the pieces could fit together. The two men in the cruiser almost had to be strangers in this area—nobody here had ever turned up missing. But, still, he thought, there could be a hundred other explanations.

“Look, Pat,” he said. “It’s probably just a coincidence. Maybe he went on somewhere else. And just hasn’t written yet.” Yet, he thought. It had been three months.

“No,” she said quietly. She looked at him and her face was calm, perfectly controlled, but he could see the infinite unhappiness in the eyes. “There’s more. There’s no way to escape it. But the awful thing is why? Why? There’s no reason he should have come here. He’d never been here before in his life. Why should he take Griffin’s boat? Why did it explode? What were they trying to do out there?”

“Maybe you’d better start at the beginning,” he said gently. “What makes you so sure he was on board?”

She stared directly at him. “Something I overheard them say. A word I’m beginning to hate.”

“What word?”

“Robert.”

“I must be slowing up,” he said wearily. “I should have guessed that one.”

“Yes. How on earth could just one person—” She stopped and looked at him hopelessly. “What is it, Pete? Where is he? Is he dead? Is he still here?”

“I don’t know. The thing that puzzles me most, though, is how there could have been only one Robert Counsel. He must have been triplets, at least.” He shook his head. “But go ahead.”

“To begin with,” she said, “my name isn’t Lasater. It’s Devers. Patricia Devers. And I’m not from Ohio. I’m from Chicago. My brother’s name was

Carl, and the man who was killed with him was Charles Morton, but Carl always referred to him as Chappie.”

“Was he an old friend of your brother?” Reno asked.

“Not exactly. He was somebody he knew in the Army during the war. He was from New York.”

“I see,” Reno said thoughtfully. “But how did they happen to come down here?”

“I’ll get to that in a minute, Pete. But first, when Carl came back from the Army in 1946, he was changed somehow. I don’t know exactly how to put it, but his attitude toward everything, and especially his job, seemed to be different. He lost that job, and I don’t know how many more, and when I would try to talk to him about it all I’d ever get was an impression he was just waiting for some big deal or that he considered work a stupid pastime for suckers. I don’t like to say all this, Pete, but it’s part of it and I can’t leave it out. Six years is a long time to readjust to civilian life.

“And then in April of this year he received a letter from Italy. I think it was from a girl he knew when he was there with the Army. Anyway, it was addressed in a girl’s handwriting.”

Reno stared thoughtfully. “He was in Italy during the war?”

“Yes, Africa, and then over there. Anyway, a day or two after this letter from Italy, he received one from this Charles Morton in New York. Carl became strangely excited, and for two or three weeks he wrote a lot of letters. He got another one, air mail, from the girl in Italy, and several from Morton.

“It was around the third or fourth of May when Morton arrived from New York to see Carl. He stayed over night with us. There was a great deal of talk in Carl’s room, and that’s when I heard them mention the name Robert.

“The next day,” she went on, “Carl asked to borrow my car for a trip down to the Gulf Coast. They were going fishing, he said. He’d quit his job too. I let him have the car anyway. There was no point in arguing about it; it was so like him to quit a job for the slightest reason.

“They left that night. I received a couple of post cards from him from various places on the way down, and one last one from Waynesport. Two weeks went by before Mother began to be really worried about him. I still didn’t think anything was wrong, but to soothe her I wrote to the police at

Waynesport and several other cities along the coast, giving them the information on the car and descriptions of Carl and Charles Morton.

“They all answered promptly and tried to be of help in any way they could, but there was absolutely no trace of the men or the car. They’d just vanished. Mother began to be frantic, and I had to have the doctor for her. It was about this time I began to have that awful feeling about it myself. I don’t know what it was exactly, except that I knew somehow they hadn’t been going fishing at all and that something terrible had happened to them. I began to think about those letters, but when I went through Carl’s room they weren’t there—any of them. That was odd, in itself, for he always just threw letters in a drawer of his desk. And there was another thing. A gun, an Italian pistol he had brought back as a souvenir, was gone too.

“I had read about the odd explosion on a fishing boat somewhere down here on the Gulf, but at the time it happened, on the tenth, I hadn’t received Carl’s card and didn’t even know they were down here. There’d only been a few lines about it in our paper, anyway.

“Then one night while I was lying awake and worrying it just hit me, all at once. I almost went crazy between then and daylight, trying to remember exactly where the explosion had been, and when. I didn’t have a class that morning, so I went to the public library and looked it up. When I found it, I was scared—more scared than I’d ever been in my life.

“I didn’t tell Mother. I called the Waynesport police from a pay phone and asked if the two men had ever been identified. They said no, and wanted to know who I was. I told them they had the information on the car in their files, and asked them to check on it. They came back and said it couldn’t be Carl and Morton because no such car had ever been picked up or even seen. And naturally, if they had been killed in the explosion the car would still be there wherever they’d left it to get aboard the boat. I didn’t press it any further, but I did see there was one flaw in that.”

“Yes,” Reno said. “There’s one, anyway.”

“That’s right,” she went on. “The car could have been stolen when they didn’t come back. We never heard any more. After school was out I came down here. I didn’t use my own name or say what I was looking for because by then I was convinced that there was something terrible behind all this.”

“I began to hear about Robert Counsel, because this country is saturated with him and his family. There was a horrible fascination in the names. Try

it. Counsel Bayou, where the boat exploded. Robert, the man they were talking about. Robert Counsel. Then early this month I met Mr. McHugh. He came by the camp asking questions about a man named Conway. Rupert Conway. You see? Names again—but I'll get to that in a minute.

“Conway was supposed to be driving a Cadillac with California license plates and towing a boat. I'd seen him. I told Mr. McHugh about it, how the man had turned off into the timber just beyond the camp one evening at dusk. We talked about it for a long time, and the more he told me about the man the more he sounded like all the things I'd heard about Robert Counsel.

“We were both excited about it. Mr. McHugh made more inquiries and came to the conclusion they were the same man. But that brought us up against something else, something that didn't fit. Why the assumed name? Counsel wasn't a criminal. And that wasn't all the puzzle. Assuming he did want to change his name for some reason we couldn't even guess, why would a man as brilliant as they say he was fall into the same error as a lot of the more stupid type of criminals? Mr. McHugh pointed it out. You see? The same initials, the same four syllables altogether, and even the same accent, or beat. Try them aloud. Mr. McHugh had a theory about the initials.”

“Yes,” Reno said musingly. “That's an old story. Monogrammed possessions he'd have had to throw away otherwise.” But that wasn't all of it. He was thinking of something else, of a boy who liked to cut the fuses short. It was a game, playing with danger.

He turned, and the fine brown eyes were regarding him with an unhappiness in which there was no longer very much hope. “What do you think it all means, Pete?” she asked. “What is it?”

He shook his head. “I don't know. But has it occurred to you that one of the craziest things about the whole mess is the way we're obsessed with this Counsel guy? Just take a look at it. There isn't any evidence at all that he had anything to do with killing Mac, and I don't see how on earth he could have had any connection with that boat explosion, even if it was certain your brother was aboard. But what do we do? We look for Counsel, we try to guess what he was doing, why he came back here, where he is now, whether he's dead or not, why he changed his name . . . What for? What is there about it?”

“Just the fact,” she said slowly, “that we both know he’s at the bottom of it somewhere. Mr. McHugh felt it too. He said that if we ever really understood Robert Counsel we’d see the answer to it.”

“Yes. I know that,” Reno said. “But why? Let’s look at it objectively. He couldn’t be here unless he’s dead, because he’s too well known. And if he’s dead, he couldn’t have shot Mac, or set off those explosions we heard today, or chased us out of there with a rifle, or moved that trailer—” He stopped, suddenly conscious he had forgotten about that.

“Trailer?” she asked, puzzled.

“Yes. Don’t you remember when you came up in your boat while I was peeking at something with the rod, with my head under water?”

“Yes. But what?”

“That was a boat trailer. And it almost had to be the one Counsel was pulling. But when I went back the next morning to pull it out, it was gone.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened with comprehension. “I see it now. You thought I knew what you’d found and moved it, or told somebody about it.”

“Frankly, yes. It was the obvious guess. But you didn’t even mention it to anybody? I mean, that you saw me there.”

“No,” she said.

She was telling the truth. There was no doubt of that. “Then somebody else saw me,” he said.

She turned suddenly, and her eyes were full of excitement. “Max Easter!”

“What!”

“He was right around that next bend. I remember now. I hadn’t heard his motor start.”

“What was he doing up there?” Reno demanded swiftly.

“Fishing. I was sketching him, until the light failed. He must have been still there.”

“All right,” Reno said. He went on, talking fast, his eyes growing hard. “So Easter has to be our boy. Counsel disappeared off the earth at that spot, so far as we know.

But Easter doesn’t know that anybody ever trailed him that far. The only thing he could see was that I was about to uncover the trailer and stumble on the fact that Counsel had been there. So he moved it, to cover up the evidence. Counsel was dead, but he didn’t want anybody to find out. You

can see what that adds up to. And I suppose you know about Counsel and Easter's wife."

"Yes" she said. "I've heard that. They still talk about it around here. But, Pete, you're looking for the man who killed Mr. McHugh, and I don't think it was Easter."

"Why?"

"Because Mr. McHugh was shot right at one o'clock in the morning, according to the papers. It was about twenty after one when I got back to the camp, and I saw Max Easter's pickup truck come out onto the highway just as I turned in. So he couldn't possibly have been in town at one. I'm sorry, Pete."

He felt the whole thing come crashing down on him again. For almost a minute he'd been certain he was very close to the answer. "You're sure it was Easter?" he said wearily.

"I'm positive it was his truck. I've seen it lots of times."

"But you didn't actually see who was driving it?"

"No. It was too dark. But it's not likely anybody else would be."

He sighed. "All right. But how do we get away from the fact that it almost had to be Easter who moved that trailer?"

"We can't. That's the terrible part of this whole thing. As soon as you learn something you turn up another fact that denies it. I've studied Easter a long time. He has posed for me, and I've had him guide me a lot. He tolerates me, but I think he hates women, or is contemptuous of them, probably because of his wife's leaving him. He's intelligent, self-educated, radical, and very bitter, and I believe that if he were convinced Robert Counsel had wronged him, he'd kill him with no regret. But I don't believe he'd try to hide it. He'd do it openly, with nothing but contempt for the consequences.

"Sometimes I've been so afraid of him I get cold all over, knowing what he'd do if he had an idea I was spying on him. I've seen him staring at me with those cold, utterly emotionless eyes of his, and wondered what he was thinking—" She shivered.

"Not any more," Reno said flatly. "You don't go anywhere with him alone again. We're in this together now, and you can't take any more chances like that."

She faced him quietly. "I'm glad we are, Pete. I don't feel so alone now."

It was strange, but he knew what she meant. He felt it himself. It was as if he'd never been conscious of being alone in all his self-sufficient existence until this moment had called it to his attention.

"Did you have any particular reason to think Easter was mixed up in that boat explosion?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Except that explosives had been his trade. And those theories Hutch Griffin told you about. But I've never had anything to go on. I've just been groping blindly."

He nodded. "The same as I have. And that's the reason you followed me?"

"Yes. I was beginning to have an idea of what you were up to, but I wasn't sure. And when I saw where you were heading, I began to wonder if you knew something I hadn't found out yet. You see, I think Robert Counsel is up there somewhere."

"What!"

"If he really vanished, as you say, I don't think it was down there where the trailer was. He was up there where we were today. That's where I found this."

"Found what?" He stared. She was fumbling in her purse now.

"Here," she said.

He took it, and felt the skin prickle along the back of his neck. It was a silver cigarette lighter with the initials "R.C." engraved on one side. He was conscious of an eerie feeling that at last he had put out a hand and touched the elusive and mysterious figure he had sought so long.

"Where'd you get this, Pat?" he demanded.

"I found it. Just beyond where you swam the bayou."

"When?"

"Three days ago. I was up there with Max Easter."

"Does he know you found the lighter?"

"No. I don't think he saw me pick it up. He was ahead of me when I saw it lying off to one side, near the water. I wouldn't have noticed it except a sunlight happened to hit it."

"But you didn't get a chance to look around? For anything else? I mean, you were with Easter—" His voice was tight with excitement.

"Not then," she said. "But I went back the next day. Alone. I looked around, but there wasn't any indication there'd ever been any people up

there, except somebody had cut down a tree, about a hundred yards away, back from the water.”

“A tree?” he asked. “Was it cut up?”

She tried to remember., “Just partly, I think. Why, Pete?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, his eyes thoughtful. “It just seems an odd place to cut wood. It’d have to be hauled out in a boat. There wasn’t a road of any kind, was there?”

“No.”

“And it was right near where the explosions were?”

“That’s right. Just beyond where you came out of the water.”

“Where you pulled me out of the water,” he corrected gently. Then he went on. “I’ve got to have a look at that place. I’ll do it tomorrow when I go after that boat.”

“I’ll go with you. We can take my boat with the motor.”

He shook his head. “You’d better stay. I’m suspicious of that country.”

Her voice was firm. “I’m suspicious of it too. That’s the reason I’m going.” Then she added, “I’d have to show you where I found the lighter, anyway.”

He saw the futility of argument. After all, he’d said they were in this thing together. The thought of possible danger faded as he became conscious of a wild impatience to get back up there. He had no idea of what he might find, if he found anything at all, but there was a chance the answer to everything might be there on that desolate arm of the bayou. They had to wait until tomorrow. It was no place to blunder around in at night.

\* \* \*

They had dinner at the Counselor and drove down to the Gulf. Where the ship channel met the sea, long jetties ran out from the beach, and a lighthouse swung its probing beam against the offshore darkness. He parked the car and they talked for a long time through the rushing monotone of the surf beyond them while the sea wind blew against their faces.

Once her voice broke as she was speaking of her brother, and he knew she was crying quietly in the darkness. He held her in his arms as if she were someone he had known for years, and when the crying had ceased he kissed her. She came willingly to him, with a warmth and soft fragrance that

made his breath catch suddenly in his throat; then she gently disengaged herself and moved back. Afterward, for a while, there was an awkward sort of awareness between them that made them formally polite.

When they came back to the camp he walked up on the porch of her cabin and held her hand for a moment as they said good night. In a moment of sour rebellion against the way she was beginning to dominate his thoughts he merely said, "Keep your door locked," and turned away.

He went down to the float, reluctant even to attempt sleep with his mind pulled this way and that by a mysterious and disappearing phantom called Robert Counsel and a brown-eyed girl he couldn't keep in her proper perspective. He had just put flame to a cigarette and dropped the match into the water when he heard someone coming down the path. He whirled, instantly alert.

"That you, Reno?" a voice asked. It had the soft, yet somehow vicious monotone of Skeeter's drawl.

"Yeah," Reno replied. The match had blinded him momentarily and he could only guess where the other man was. "What is it?"

"I didn't see your boat here tonight. You lose it?"

"Let's say I left it," Reno answered. "I had a little accident. Going back after it in the morning."

"Where?" Skeeter asked.

"Up the bayou a little way." Reno's eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness again and he could see him, the hard, thin slat of a figure at the foot of the trail.

"How far's a little way? And what you mean, an accident?"

"Look, Malone," Reno said, feeling irritation. "I left your boat up there. I'm going after it. If I don't find it, I'll pay you for it. Does that clear it up?"

"Mebbe." Malone's voice was utterly without emotion. "But I'm not worried much about the boat. If I was you, I'd stay out of that country up there."

Reno grew tense in the darkness. "Why?"

"You might get lost."

"I'm pretty good at finding my way around."

"So was some of the people they never found. I'd think it over. There's plenty of bass down here."

Advice? Or warning? Reno wondered about it later, after he had gone in the cabin and undressed for bed. He lay on the hard mattress trying to guess what had been behind the words.

Sleep was a long time coming. I didn't have enough parts of this, he thought, and now I've got too many. Where was the pattern of it? What connection could there be between Mac's death and two men who had disappeared off the face of the earth here one night in May, a boat that had blown up for no reason at all, a man named Counsel who was everywhere and nowhere, and explosions on a lost reach of bayou? And the last person he thought of before he finally went to sleep was Patricia Lasater.

No, Devers, he thought. Patricia Devers. He could hear the surf and see the upturned face so near to his, the eyes immense and still faintly misted with tears.

Tomorrow, they'd go up there together. He dropped off to sleep with a strange feeling that something was going to happen tomorrow.

## Fourteen

Their plans were interrupted.

He was waiting when she emerged from her cabin early the next morning clad in white slacks and a long-sleeved blouse. They ate breakfast together in the restaurant under the cold eye of Delia, and walked down to the float. Mildred Talley was climbing from the water.

She regarded them with an arch smile. "Going to gang up on the poor bass, are we?"

"Something like that," Reno answered briefly.

"But haven't you forgotten your tackle?" she asked innocently.

He was about to make some curt reply and turn away to the job of bailing out the boat when he looked up suddenly, catching the sound of a motor. It was not an outboard. He looked down toward the bend below them, where the bayou ran up from the highway bridge and the ship channel, and at that moment it came into view, a trim cabin cruiser dazzling in the sunlight with new white paint. Off the float it backed down with a growl of power, coming to rest in mid-channel.

The man who had been at the wheel was Hutch Griffin, in white shirt and slacks, the reckless face grinning at them from under the rakish slant of a yachting cap. "Hi, men," he called. "Let's go for a ride."

Reno was conscious of quick irritation. He had forgotten about the trial run in the new cruiser, but there was no way they could get out of it now without some explanation. He shot a quick glance at Patricia and saw her look of dismay.

As if he had been reading their thoughts, Griffin called across to them. "Only be two or three hours. I'm running down to the bar to take off a pilot, and we'll be back by eleven."

There was nothing to do but make the best of it. "We'll be right with you," Reno said.

"I can't come alongside," Griffin explained. "Not enough water there. Pull out in one of those skiffs. You can give it a shove back, and Mildred can tie it up. How about it, baby?" This last was addressed to Mildred Talley. "Or can you go too?"

"No," she replied, pouting. "I've got to work."

Reno caught the sidelong, icy look at Patricia, and was conscious that at last he understood the answer to something in this country. Mildred was jealous. She had her eye on Griffin, which accounted for the catty remarks about the dark-haired girl. Then, unaccountably, he was jealous himself. He angrily shrugged it off. What did he care?

He pulled the skiff alongside and Griffin helped her step up into the cockpit of the cruiser. He climbed aboard himself and shoved the skiff back toward the landing. He and Patricia sat down on leather-covered seats running along opposite sides of the cockpit, while Griffin pressed the starter.

Reno noted with surprise they did not turn around. The cruiser gathered speed, straight ahead up the channel. In a few minutes they had rounded the first turn and had passed the arm of the bayou that ran north, where he had gone yesterday.

Then he remembered the second highway bridge. "Can you get back to the ship channel up this way?" he asked Griffin.

"Yeah. About a mile up here. Bayou goes back across the highway."

"Hutch, I like your boat," Patricia said. "It's lovely."

"Handles like a dream," Griffin said, glancing back over his shoulder and grinning. "When we get out to the ship channel you can take over."

Her eyes were excited as she glanced across at Reno. "Do you think a landlubber could handle it all right?"

"Sure," Griffin said easily. "Just like driving a car."

In a few more minutes they had passed the old campground on their left, where he had discovered the trailer. Thinking of it reminded Reno that by now they would have been on their way up the bayou, and for a moment he was irritated and impatient. But whatever was up there could wait another few hours.

They swung left now and were headed south. As soon as they straightened out Reno could see the steel highway bridge up ahead. Whoever towed that trailer away, he thought, could have come right

through here and dumped it in thirty-five feet of water in the ship channel itself.

Griffin looked around at them as they approached the steel span and said something Reno didn't catch above the noise of the engine. He and Patricia got up and went over to stand beside him at the instrument panel, looking out ahead.

"I say there used to be a wooden bridge here years ago," Griffin repeated. "Had a lot of piling under it, spans not over twelve feet apart, and Robert Counsel used to shoot it in those speedboats of his."

At mention of the name, Reno and Patricia looked at each other. "Reckless, eh?" Reno said, hoping he would go on.

"Reckless? Mother, dear!" Griffin said, and whistled softly. "A lot of people used to have the idea Robert was kind of a mamma's boy—I mean, all that money, private tutors, that kind of stuff—but they just didn't know him. I was with him one day when he came through here in a souped-up job that could really get up and fly. There was a girl in front with him, and another in the back seat with me—we were all about sixteen, I guess—and when his girl saw that bridge ahead and the clearance we had to get through between the pilings she fainted. She fell right over onto Robert, and he took it through with one hand, trying to get her off him with the other. You could have reached out a hand and touched a piling on either side, and he was clocking around fifty-five miles an hour."

"If you'll pardon my saying so, Hutch," Patricia said, "your friend Robert just doesn't sound very bright to me."

Griffin shook his head and grinned. "That's the hell of it though. He was. Brilliant son-of-a-gun. But he was just easily bored.

"You take those speedboats and runabouts of his; he designed most of the hulls and propellers himself. Did it by feel, or instinct, or something, the way somebody else could write a symphony. There's a hell of a lot of mathematics to hull design, even for a garbage scow, and when you start playing around with speed it gets rugged. Not that he didn't know the math—he did; but I think he felt the answers instead of working them out.

"He had a nasty sense of humor, though," Griffin went on. They passed under the highway bridge and in a moment came out into the ship channel. At this point it described a sweeping turn, leaving its course roughly

paralleling the highway and running south for half a mile between high walls of trees. The dredged channel itself was marked by buoys.

"You want me to take it now, Hutch?" Patricia asked.

"In just a minute, honey," Griffin replied. "As soon as we get past that dredge. It's working around the next bend."

What was that about Counsel's sense of humor?" Reno asked.

"Oh." Griffin leaned forward over the wheel and swung his head with soft laughter. "I wanted to tell you about that. Robert and I were in prep school together for a couple of terms, and about this time somebody started that goldfish-swallowing gag again. And there was this big blowhard of a joker who'd been trying to give Robert a bad time. Anyway, this joker was making a big name for himself swallowing fish and throwing his weight around, when Robert showed up from somewhere with one just a little bigger and bet him fifty dollars he couldn't swallow it. The joker gulped it right down, like a hungry pelican, and began hollering for his fifty. Robert gave it to him, real deadpan, and asked how he felt. 'Fine,' the joker says. 'Why?' So then Robert told him. It was murder. 'Nothing,' he says. 'Except I'd be careful about coughing. That goldfish had two dynamite caps inside it.'"

"Good Lord," Patricia said, horrified. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Griffin laughed again. "The joker just went limp and passed out. They eased him over to the infirmary and went to work on him with a stomach pump. They got the fish out."

"But were there really two caps in it?"

"Nobody ever knew. The doctor and nurse wouldn't say. But the joker's family took him out of school the next week, and Robert's mother took him to Europe. Personally, knowing Robert, I'd say there were."

They rounded the turn and passed the busy rumble of the dredge just beyond. Some men on deck waved as they went past.

"What do they do with the mud?" Patricia asked. "'I don't see any pipes."

"Hopper dredge," Griffin explained laconically. "Fills up and runs back outside to dump the stuff offshore."

"Does it work on the channel all the time?"

"No. They just started this section the first of the month. Going to dredge from here up five miles."

They were past it now and the channel was clear. Griffin stepped back from the wheel and sat down on one of the leather seats, stretching out his legs and lighting a cigarette.

“Hey—” Patricia said, startled.

He grinned. “Honey, you’re driving now. Just keep to the right, and watch out for traffic cops.” He looked across at Reno and winked.

Reno felt the stirrings of jealous anger, but let none of it show on his face. Griffin was a likable guy, but there was just a little too much easy familiarity in the way he spoke to Pat. But hell, maybe he talked to all the girls that way.

A little over a mile below the dredge they passed a ferry and a small shrimp-freezing plant. Griffin nodded, “My place over there,” he said, indicating a dock at which two small diesel tugs were moored.

In a short while the heavy timber along the banks began to thin out and they were running through flat salt marsh. Reno could see the white tower of the lighthouse straight ahead. They ran on out between the twin rock walls of the jetties and past the light.

“How far out do we go?” Patricia asked.

“Sea buoy,” Griffin said. “Last one out there, about a mile.” He got up and opened the small door going forward, and the sound of the big marine engine increased. “Just keep her on course, Skipper,” he called back, grinning over his shoulder. In a moment he emerged with a trolling rod and a big reel. He set them up, attached a white feather jig to the leader, and began paying out line.

“All right,” he called, “who wants to catch the first mackerel?”

“Ladies first,” Reno said.

Griffin took the wheel and throttled the engine back to slow trolling speed. Patricia settled into the seat at the rear of the cockpit and held the rod. In a few minutes she had a strike, but lost the fish. She landed the next one, a mackerel slightly over a foot long.

Reno enjoyed watching her. Any other time the cruise would have been fun and he would have been reluctant to see it end, but now he was conscious of a gnawing impatience to get back.

He took out cigarettes and offered Griffin one. “This pilot on his way down on a ship now?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Griffin craned his neck, looking astern. Then he glanced at his watch. “Should be showing any time now. Said he’d be down to the bar around ten.”

“Don’t the pilots have a boat of their own?” Reno asked curiously.

“Yes, but it’s in for overhaul. When they go to the yard they give most of the business to me. I usually use one of the tugs, but thought I’d try this one today, since it’s smooth out here.”

In another twenty minutes the ship was in sight astern. Patricia reeled in her line while Griffin advanced throttle and changed course to intersect the ship’s course as it cleared the sea buoy. They came up alongside and Reno could see the name. It was the SS Silver Bay. His eyes narrowed reflectively. Wasn’t that the one—? No, he remembered. The one Counsel had been on was the Silver Cape. It must be the same line, however. Probably all named Silver something.

They bumped against the side. In a moment he heard the rattle of a Jacob’s ladder and the pilot stepped down onto the foredeck of the cruiser. He slid around the’ outside of the cabin and dropped into the cockpit.

Griffin introduced them with a sweeping wave of the hand as he advanced the throttle and spun the wheel to break contact with the ship. “Breaking in a new crew, Cap,” he called over his shoulder.

Captain Shevlin was a salty little gamecock with a merry eye. He regarded Patricia Devers appreciatively. “Smartest-looking deckhand you ever had. I’m going to sign her on the pilot boat.”

It developed almost immediately he was a talker with an almost unstoppable flow of awesome language. He sat down, pushed back the battered felt hat with its turned-up brim, stuck a long cigar in his mouth, and set sail on an enchanting voyage of reminiscence, which ranged from typhoons in the Indian Ocean to water-front brawls in Liverpool, and from torpedoings in the First World War to intrigues with Oriental dancing girls, all of it delivered in highly pungent language and with an incomparable gift for imagery.

It was interrupted only twice in fifteen miles. Once, as they passed the Griffin dock, Hutch looked back over his shoulder and laughed. “You see why they call him Silent Shevlin?” he asked Reno. Then he broke in on the flow of words. “Say, Cap, I’m going all the way in to town to have a couple

of things on here looked at in the boat yard. You want to stay aboard, or get off and catch the bus?”

“I’ll stay aboard,” Captain Shevlin waved an offhand paw. Then he turned back to Patricia. “Now, where was I? Oh, yes. So I says to the Mate, ‘Go down there and tell . . .’”

Reno forgot some of his impatience in listening. As they came up past the dredge they met a small tug coming down towing two deep-laden oil barges. One of the barges was swinging, and Griffin had to back down quickly and pull in behind the dredge to avoid collision.

Captain Shevlin bounded up in the cockpit, cupped his hands, and yelled across to the towboat captain. “Hey, Ernie, why don’t you keep steerageway on that bedpan? You think you’re herding cows to pasture, or something?”

The towman waved good-naturedly. “Relax, Cap. You’re flipping your lid.”

They eased out from behind the dredge and proceeded around the next bend of the channel, which opened into the half-mile reach below the highway. “Always something,” Captain Shevlin complained bitterly. “You know, a man that’d pilot on this channel for a living when he could just as easy have been a pimp or a one-legged panhandler must enjoy torturing himself.”

Patricia looked at Reno and laughed, and the Captain shook his head with the unmistakable and dreamy expression that signaled another story. “It reminds me, Hutch, of one night this spring, right in this exact spot. I was bringing one of the Silver line ships up—and that was a trip to land you in the Happy Ward.

“When I climbed aboard out on the bar I landed right in the middle of a fight. Two of the stewards had got gassed up on paint-thinner or compass alcohol or something and was trying to choke each other’s eyeballs out in a tangle in the forward well deck and the poor Mate was running around unscrambling ‘em.

“Well, they finally get things quieted down and we start up, and everything is fine except the Old Man has to stay on the bridge and has the Third Mate up there, and the Second Mate, and would have had the Mate and bosun except they had brains enough to stay on the fo’c’sle head where they belonged. And the helmsman was one of them correspondence-school

AB's that didn't know his foot from his elbow, and every time I'd tell him to ease the helm he'd steady her up.

"It's as black as the inside of a blind muley-cow, and just about the time we make the swing right here and start readying her up on the next range it starts to pour rain. Then I spot running lights poking out from that next bend above here, and remembered there was a Mid-Gulf tanker due to come down loaded about that time. You know how they are, loaded, sway-bellied and dragging bottom all the way. They're drawing thirty feet by the time they get through filling everything on board, and they need all the room they can get in this channel.

"Well, we both get lined out on the ranges and we're only about six hundred yards apart and closing fast and the Old Man and I are hanging over the port wing of the bridge trying to see enough of the tanker's running-lights through the rain to tell whether we're lined up red-to-red or whether we're about to run between 'em, when right here about a hundred yards south of this Number Fourteen buoy there is the damnedest ker-splash you ever heard, right under us. Sounds like at least two men have fallen overboard.

"So of course the same thought hits everybody right at the same time. It's them two chowder-headed messboys at it again.

"Well, Captain Wilbur starts to wave his arms and foam out orders like a soda fire-extinguisher.

" 'Cap,' I says, 'if you think I'm going to lose steerage-way on this bucket with a hundred and fifty thousand barrels of high-test gas booming down on us just because your pot-wallopers are throwing each other over the side, you're as nutty as I am. Steady as she goes.'

"So, by God, when we get out of the bind he sends somebody down to see which one threw the other over the side, and I'm damned if they're not both still there."

Griffin looked back over his shoulder at them. "What ship did you say that was, Cap?" he asked casually.

"Hell, I can't remember, Hutch. Silver Line, anyway."

Reno had started to light a cigarette. He held the match now, and stared thoughtfully out across the water, conscious of something that had disturbed his thoughts. Then he shrugged. Whatever it was had gone now. Windy old character, he thought amiably, looking at Shevlin again.

“But what was the splash?” Patricia asked.

“Miss, you’ve got me. But you haven’t heard all of it yet. About twenty minutes later, just about a half mile above the old Counsel landing, there’s some lousy puddle-jumping motorboat right in the middle of the channel. He can’t seem to make up his mind where he wants to go, and I’m trying to ease past him without tearing down all the timber along the bank, when all of a sudden I’m damned if there ain’t another ker-splash there under us in the same place!”

Griffin whooped with laughter. “Skipper,” he called back, “some day you’re going to start believing those stories yourself. Then you’ll be tough to live with.”

“It’s the Gospel, Hutch—”

“I’ll bet it is! But listen. I want you to check something for me. I keep thinking I’ve got some kind of phony vibration period here. As if the wheel was off balance. You feel it? Wait’ll I rev her up .”

He advanced the throttle. Captain Shevlin listened, his head cocked to one side. “Sounds as smooth as an eel to me.”

Griffin shook his head, frowning. “Maybe so. But I’ll have the yard put her through the vibration test again.” He glanced suddenly around. “Hello. We’re off Seabreeze. We got to duck in here and unload your audience, you sea-going Uncle Remus.”

## Fifteen

Reno cut the outboard motor and let the boat drift silently. They were nearly up to the second fork in the channel, where he had first heard the explosions the day before.

“We’ll take it the rest of the way on the oars,” he said. “No use advertising any more than we have to.”

She nodded, and they exchanged seats. It was midday now, hushed and stifling out in the dimness of the timber and glaring with malevolent brassiness along the channel where there was no protection from the sun. As the forward motion of the boat died, and with it the artificial breeze, they felt the heat close in on them with its weight.

Back at camp she had changed into darker slacks and shirt, at his insistence. “You can see white a mile through that timber,” he said. “And we don’t know what’s up there. Or who.”

He pulled with long, even strokes of the oars, skirting the brush along the bank, and when they spoke at all it was in lowered voices. They were tense, as if the very stillness of the place were somehow deceptive and they expected something to break it at any instant.

“You always have the feeling you’re being watched,” she said quietly.

Or about to be shot at, he thought without putting it into words. With a cold stirring of anger he remembered the shooting of the day before and the mysterious explosions he had heard. But there might be nothing at all up here now, he reminded himself. That was yesterday.

When they came up to the place where she had hidden the boat before, he pulled it in under the branches and tied it up. He helped her out, and they remained for a moment in the concealment of the foliage along the bank, staring out across the timbered bottom. It was as peaceful as eden. Yesterday’s violence was only a bad dream.

He walked ahead. They circled the bend of the channel and came out near the water again at the point where she had pulled him from the

entangling limbs of the windfall. He looked out at it, thinking that but for her his body would be lying there now below the dark surface of the water.

"What is it?" she asked softly, behind him.

"I was thinking of something I read about the Chinese once. If you save somebody's life he belongs to you and you have to take care of him as long as he lives."

Just for a moment her eyes were very soft; then he saw the old faintly bantering smile come into them, and she said, "Aren't you lucky this isn't China? Think of having to live on a school teacher's salary."

Then, before he could reply, she went on, "The place where I found the lighter is just another hundred yards or so. Hadn't we better go on?"

"Yes," he said. She took the lead, and they moved ahead through the trees and low hanging underbrush along the bank, going toward the bend of the bayou above them. That was where the first shots had come from, and he was certain the explosions had been just beyond it. She slowed in a moment, searching the ground.

"It was right here," she said. They stood in a small opening in the underbrush some twenty feet back from the bank. There was no trail, however, and the hard earth showed no tracks.

"You're sure this is it?" he asked, gazing around.

"Yes." She pointed. "The lighter was lying right there by that clump of grass. And I remember that dead tree, the one that's leaning over and caught in that oak."

He walked over and squatted down, examining the ground closely. Then he could see it, the faint outline where something had lain. It had rained since the lighter had been dropped there. But there was nothing else. He went over all the ground carefully. Then he walked out to the bank and examined the edge of the water for some distance, looking for any indication a boat had been pulled up there. He could see none.

He walked back to where she was standing, and shook his head at her questioning glance. Conscious of bitter disappointment, he wondered if this lead would evaporate into nothing the way all the others had. Counsel must have been here, but there was absolutely nothing to indicate why, or where he had been going. He took out two cigarettes and lit them. She sat down on a log and he squatted on his heels in front of her, watching as she took off the long-vizored cap and ran her fingers through her hair.

“I looked all around when I came back the next day,” she said dispiritedly. “I couldn’t find anything either. Except that tree—the one somebody had cut down.”

“Oh.” He had forgotten about the tree. Again he was faintly puzzled; it was a stupid place to cut wood, this far from a road. “Which way was it?”

“Over there.” She turned and pointed away from the bayou. “You can’t see it from here.”

“O.K. We’ll have a look at it before we go back,” he said without much interest. “But right now let’s go up beyond that bend. Maybe we can find out what they were trying to blow up.”

It was only a short distance, cutting across the point. Almost unconsciously they began to hurry as they caught glimpses of open water through the trees ahead. They came out onto the bank at an opening in the trees and looked out across the flat and glaring expanse of water. Nothing moved anywhere; it was as desolate and uninhabited as all the other bayous.

They looked at each other, and he shook his head. “It’s crazy,” he said, baffled. “This whole country is crazy. I know this is where that dynamite was set off. But what in the name of God could they have been blowing here?”

She turned suddenly, and pointed toward the water close to shore. “What’s that white thing floating there? In the edge of those weeds.”

He walked over and looked. “Just a dead fish,” he called back. It was floating belly up.

“There’s another one,” she said, pointing off to the left. She was walking up the bank now. “And two more.”

He looked down the other way and in a moment had counted a half dozen. Picking up a long stick, he raked two of them ashore and turned them over. They were carp, not yet beginning to decompose, and there were no marks on them.

She came over and stood behind him. “That’s odd, isn’t it?” she said, puzzled. “Why do you suppose they all died?”

“Concussion,” he said succinctly.

“Oh. You mean the dynamite?”

“Right. We can quit wondering where those explosions were. They were right here, under water.”

She looked helplessly out across the desolate reach of the bayou. "But what for, Pete? What could anybody blow up here?"

He remembered something then, and he was beginning to understand. He stood up, feeling bitter disappointment again. "We're wasting time, Pat," he said wearily. "This hasn't got anything to do with what we're looking for."

"What do you mean?" she asked wonderingly.

"Something that Talley girl told me about Max Easter's being such a good fisherman. That's all this is. He and some other man were dynamiting fish for the market. They shot at me to scare me off."

"Well," she said dispiritedly, "I guess we'd might as well go."

"Yes. We've hit another dead end."

When they reached the place she had found the lighter, she paused. "Do you want to look at that tree, anyway?"

He shrugged. They'd probably find nothing there either. It could have been coon hunters . . . "All right," he said without interest. "It'll only take a minute."

She led the way. It was nearer a quarter mile than a hundred yards, but she went unerringly to it through the dense timber. The tree was a large red oak, and it had broken the tops out of two smaller ones as it crashed down. It had been felled with a saw, but no attempt had been made to cut it up.

"What do you suppose it was, Pete?" she asked.

Reno walked around the welter of limbs. It had been cut down sometime in the past month or two, for while the leaves were dead now none of them had fallen from the boughs. The trunk appeared to be sound, and had not been cut into anywhere, which ruled out the possibility of its having been a bee tree robbed of its wild honey.

"I don't know," he said curiously. "Doesn't seem to be much point to it, does there?"

He had started to move on around to the other side when he halted suddenly, peering down into the screen of leaves. He dropped to his knees and pulled a few smaller branches aside, staring at the ground, his face puzzled.

"What is it, Pete?" she asked suddenly, standing behind him.

He reached in and scooped up something, and held his hand out. "Loose soil," he said. "Not fresh, because it's been rained on since it was dug up,

but look.”

She saw it then. One clod of the heavy, black earth still bore the unmistakable flat mark of the spade.

She bent down beside him, excited again. “Then something, has been dug up here.”

“Dug up,” he said tersely. “Or planted.”

“What?”

“You’d better stand back, Pat. I’m going to see if I can break off some of these limbs.”

She stepped back and watched curiously as he began a furious assault on the brush. It was near the crown of the tree, and he was able to snap off most of the limbs by bending back on them with terrific bursts of energy. The ones that were too large to break had their smaller limbs broken off. He was sweating, and he began to pant with exertion.

In a few minutes he had a considerable area cleared. He could see it now, the thing he was looking for. It was a long, narrow, and just faintly outlined depression where the earth had settled. It ran back under the main stem of the tree, but some of it extended out into the area he had cleared.

Maybe I shouldn’t, with her here, he thought. Then he remembered the trailer. Evidence had a way of disappearing in this country. He stood up and took out his cigarettes. He gave her one and led her back to where she could sit on the log.

“I think you’d better stay here,” he said. “This may not be pretty.”

“I can stand it if you can,” she protested. He knew then he wasn’t fooling her any more. She was as aware as he was of what was under there.

He picked up one of the limbs he had broken off, cut a section about two feet long, and whittled the end of it flat. It wasn’t much, but it would do.

She remained where she was, but forgot to smoke the cigarette. It dropped, unnoticed from her fingers. He attacked the ground with his improvised digging instrument. The ground was soft, and came up easily. He threw it behind him with his hands, like a furiously digging terrier. In a few minutes the hole was a foot deep. Sweat ran off his face. Now he was nearly two feet down, bent forward with his hands in the hole, almost suffocated with the heat. He ran the stick into the soft earth again, pried up, and suddenly stopped. He backed away, feeling the sickness in his stomach.

Maybe she didn't get the odor, he thought. There was no breeze at all. But she would soon. He had to get her away.

The thing to do was send her to camp to call the Sheriff's office. Whatever was in here was going to be a job for identification experts anyway; he knew that now. It had to be done correctly, by men who knew what they were doing. And men with good stomachs too.

He turned and had started to rise out of the encircling brush when he heard her sudden, choked-off cry of terror. He swung fast, starting. She had her hand up over her mouth, and her eyes were wide with fear.

It was Max Easter. He had emerged from the brush twenty feet away and was watching them coldly, his thumbs hooked in the waistband of his trousers. And stuck in the same waistband, just in front of his right hand, was the black butt of a .45 automatic.

He removed the gun, caught the action in his other hand, slid it back and then forward, jacking a shell into the chamber, then shoved it back in his waistband.

"Just couldn't leave things alone, could you?" he asked, without any emotion whatever. "Suppose you get over there with your lady friend and sit down. And throw away that stick."

Reno had seen deadliness before, and he knew he was looking at it now. He let the stick slide from his fingers, and walked slowly over to Patricia. Easter watched them with the unwinking stare of a cat, saying nothing.

He could feel the sweat on his face and the tightness in his chest. Without looking around, he groped for one of her hands, and squeezed it. He could hear the shaky intake of her breath.

"All right," he said at last. "Who is it?"

"Just have to know, do you?"

"That's right," Reno said. "And we will, as soon as they get him out."

"No," Easter said softly. "I don't think anybody's going to dig him up. But since there's not much chance you'll blab it around, I'll tell you. His name was Robert Counsel."

## Sixteen

There was too much of it to take hold of all at once. At first Reno could grasp nothing except the incredible fact that he had finally caught up with Robert Counsel. The elusive phantom he had pursued so long was buried under the tangled branches of that tree. The questions were answered. Robert Counsel had been dead all the time, and this big, cold-eyed man with the gun in his belt was the one who had killed McHugh.

"You got away with it for a long time, didn't you?" he asked.

"That's right," Easter said coolly. "I thought you'd get wise to yourself and mind your own business after that trailer disappeared, and you got conked that night."

"Well, isn't that too bad?" Reno asked. "So we could just go ahead and let my sister take the rap for killing McHugh."

"McHugh?" Easter looked puzzled for an instant. "Oh, you mean the guy that actress shot. What's he got to do with it?"

Reno stared. Was he dealing with a lunatic as well as a murderer? "Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. Except you killed him because he found out you killed Counsel."

"You seem to be a little mixed up, friend," Easter remarked calmly. "I haven't killed anybody—yet."

"So I suppose the pixies buried Counsel there, and wrote you a letter?"

"No. I buried him. And I enjoyed every bit of it, even spitting in his face. There's only one thing I'd have enjoyed more, and that's killing him. Somebody beat me to the honor."

"You expect anybody to believe that?"

"Of course not," Easter said simply. "That's the reason I buried him."

Reno stared. "You put him in there—but you don't have any idea who killed him?"

"Now you're catching on," Easter said. "A little late, but you finally got it. You see what I mean about nobody digging him up? And they won't dig

you up, either.”

Reno shot a sidewise glance at Patricia. She was silently watching, her eyes big with horror. She knows it, too, he thought; Easter’s a maniac, and any minute now he’ll pull out that .45 and let us have it.

“Listen,” he said desperately, “if you didn’t kill Counsel, what have you got to worry about?”

Easter regarded him with cool contempt. “Why, not a thing. Except the jury wouldn’t be out five minutes. Everybody in this county knows Counsel ran off with my wife in 1942. And a few of them even know what happened after that.” He paused, and for a moment his eyes were the most terrible Reno had ever seen.

“He left her after three weeks, and she committed suicide in a crummy, fourth-class hotel in New Orleans. She hanged herself.”

The awful silence dragged out for a full minute before Reno said, “But, damn it, that still doesn’t mean—”

“Oh, of course not,” Easter broke in coldly. “Especially the way it happened. They’d never think I had anything to do with it.”

“How did it happen?”

“It was one night a little over a month ago. I was bringing a load of fish down to the highway in my boat. I guess you know why it was at night. Anyway, I tied up in the brush close to that old camp ground a little after dark and was waiting for Malone to bring the truck. And just about that time I heard three shots a long way off, over on the ship channel. About twenty minutes later some car lights showed up, and I thought it was Malone, until it was too late and the guy had spotted me in the road. It was the game warden. To make it worse, I had this gun in my belt, and he saw it. He wanted to know what I was doing, and just about that time we both saw the other car in his headlights. It was a Cadillac, parked there in the camp ground, and there was an empty boat trailer over by the water. I hadn’t noticed ‘em before.

“I had to get him out of there some way before Malone showed up with the truck, so I told him I was guiding for the fishermen who owned the Cadillac. That seemed to satisfy him, so he left.

“About thirty minutes later Malone showed up, we loaded the fish, and he left. I started back to my boat, which wasn’t far from that trailer, and right there in the road by the Cadillac I stumbled over something. I

switched on the flashlight and looked. It was a man, lying there as if he had been trying to crawl back to the car.

His clothes were wet, and when I turned him over I saw blood on his shirt, mixed with the water. He'd been shot in the belly. I turned the light on his face then, and knew that if I didn't think of something real good and think of it fast I was going to hang. It was Robert Counsel."

Reno could only stare. The horrible part of it, he thought, is that he's telling the truth. The whole thing was beginning to fall into place in his mind now, and he knew why Counsel had come back, but there wasn't anything he could do. Easter was backed into a corner, and he had to kill them.

"Listen," he said desperately, "Counsel was shot over there on the ship channel, and I know why. It can be proved. Didn't you ever stop to wonder why he came back here when he knew you'd kill him if you saw him?"

"I've never tried to figure out why Robert Counsel did things," Easter said coldly.

"Well, I have," Reno snapped. "I've done nothing else since the first time I heard the name. And now I know. He came back after something over there in the ship channel, and I know where it is. If we can get our hands on it, I think it'll prove you didn't have anything to do with killing him."

"How stupid do you think I can get?" Easter asked bitterly. "Prove I didn't kill him when a witness saw me right there that night, with a gun? When I ran the trailer out in the bayou, brought him up here and buried him, and drove his car into town and left it? Cut it out."

Reno knew it was hopeless. Easter was entangled in a web of circumstantial evidence grown more damning with every move he had made to extricate himself, until now he had reached the point where he had to kill. And it was hopeless the other way. Easter was a giant of a man, in superb physical condition.

There was no chance for either of them if they sat and waited, for it, but if he could give Pat a few precious seconds it might save her. And Vickie, he thought. Slowly, still talking, he gathered his feet back under him, shifting his weight a little forward. He wanted to look around at her just once more, but didn't dare. He still had her hand in his, and now he squeezed it, twice. All right, he thought. Now.

He went in low, hard, and driving. He heard Pat scream, and saw Easter's hand come down for the gun, all of it in slow motion. Everything was focused on the hot, oily shine of the gun, coming clear, turning ... It went off, the sound crashing against his ears, as he slammed shoulder first and hurtling with all his weight into Easter's stomach. They went down and rolled. His face plowed into dirt and leaves. He groped for the arm that had the gun, found it, and felt the awful strength as it jerked free. Something crashed against his head, and blood ran down into his eyes.

They rolled again, neither of them uttering a sound except the hoarse, animal noises of their breathing. He had both hands on Easter's gun arm now, fighting with all his strength to hold onto it. Then, through all the violence, he was conscious of something else. Patricia was leaning over them, swinging a stick, and he could hear it beating against Easter's hand and wrist.

He got his mouth open, found breath somewhere, and screamed, "Run! Get away." Then the gun went off again. He felt Easter's arm thresh wildly. The gun had kicked out of his hand and was lost somewhere under them. His own hand bumped it; he felt it slide, and it was lost again. He groped frenziedly. He had it now, and was scrambling to get out of reach of those terrible arms. He was up to his knees, moving backward, when Easter swarmed off the ground and smothered him. He fell back, under the tremendous weight, and felt pain stab into his ankle. Just for an instant the big head was in front of his face and his right arm was free. Biting his jaws together against the pain, he shifted; the gun over to his right hand, and swung. There was a crunching impact, and he lifted and swung again. Easter jerked and went limp. Reno pushed him off and slid backward across the ground to get his own weight off the twisted ankle.

He struggled to his feet, tried to put his weight on the leg—the left one—and collapsed. Easter was writhing on the ground, only momentarily stunned, and trying to get up. Through the roaring in his head, Reno thought: I've got to get away from him. I can't take any more of that guy. I've got to get far enough away so I can stop him with the gun.

He suddenly realized he was speaking aloud, and wondered if the blow on his head had made him wild. He rolled; then rolled again. Pat was bending over him. "Pete! Pete! Are you all right?" She was crying.

He was against the log now. He shoved backward, inching his shoulders up until he was sitting upright with his back propped against it. Blood ran across his face, getting into his eyes again. He brushed savagely at it with his left hand. I can stop him from here, he thought. I can gut shoot him twice before he can get this far.

She was down in front of him, mopping at his face. He shoved her roughly to one side. "Move back, Pat!" he said savagely. "I'm all right, but stay out of the way."

Easter was sitting up now. He got slowly to his feet, bleeding from the cut on his head, and his eyes were terrible to look at. I went farther than that and got him, Reno thought, with cold calculation; but he had the gun in his belt. He won't come—maybe. But if he does, he'll get here dead.

He checked the safety again, and leveled it. "All right, Easter," he said. "If you move one foot, come all the way at once."

The big man's chest heaved, and he shook his head a little to clear it. The eyes were cold, weighing the factors.

"I'm not Counsel," Reno said. "You don't want me that bad. But if you do, let's have it now and get it over with."

"And if I don't?" The voice was only a whisper.

"You can run. I don't want you. They'll get you, because you're too damn big to hide, but I don't think they'll get you for murder. If I have any luck, they'll know who killed Counsel."

"And if you don't?"

"They're still going to know where he is. I'm going to tell 'em. But trying to kill me is stupid. I'm the only person in the world who knows enough about this mess now to get it off your back. Get wise to yourself! They can stick you for burying him up here and trying to cover up the murder, but you may beat it when they know the circumstances. Do anything you like, but get this! Don't try to jump me. I've got something to do, and I'll kill you if I have to."

Easter stared wickedly at the gun. "You had a lot of luck."

"I know I did. And I've still got it. Now, how's it going to be?"

For a long moment Easter continued to watch him. Counsel either had a lot of guts or he was crazy, Reno was conscious of thinking, to come back here with that looking for him. Then the big man shrugged slightly, turned

around, and walked straight away from them through the timber, going toward the bayou.

“Keep an eye on him, Pat,” Reno whispered. “As far as you can see him.”

She moved over a little and stood watching silently. In a little while she came back. “He’s gone,” she said simply. Then she sat down and took a long, shaky breath.

“I’m sorry I barked at you, Pat,” he said gently. “But it was a near thing there for a few seconds.”

“It’s all right,” she said. She reached over and wiped his face with her handkerchief. “But we’ve got to get you out of here, right now. That needs stitches.”

He pulled up the leg of his trousers. The ankle was swollen and becoming discolored, too painful to touch.

She started to say something; then stopped and listened. He heard it too. It was an outboard motor starting. Easter, he thought. He won’t be back.

He tried to stand, white-faced with the agony of it. The leg would bear no weight at all. He sat down on the log, and looked around. Taking out his knife, he pointed, “See that sapling over there, Pat? Cut it down, just above the ground, and bring it over here.”

She understood, and hurried over to hack away with the knife. When she dragged it over he trimmed it up, took off his shirt and wrapped it around the fork at the top for padding, and tried the crutch. He could hobble on it.

“I’ll go down and get the boat,” she said. “And bring it straight out there, to the nearest place. You can walk that far, with the crutch, and my helping you.”

“Wait,” he said. “Keep listening for that motor. I want to hear it get clear out of the country before you try it.”

They could still hear it, growing fainter in the distance. Then suddenly it stopped, somewhere near the bend below them. In a moment they heard it start again.

Reno thought of the three miles back to camp and the fact that everything now depended on their being down to the ship channel as soon as it was dark. He swore softly.

“Pete,” she said wonderingly. “What is it?”

“Easter just picked up the boat. We walk.”



## Seventeen

“He did it to gain time” she said. “He knew your ankle was hurt. It’ll give him that much longer to run before we could report—” She stopped and gestured mutely toward the tangle of branches.

“Probably,” he agreed. “But we don’t know.”

“Wait, Pete,” she said quickly. “I’ve got it. That boat you left up here the other day— It’d still be along the shore somewhere. I could find it.”

He shook his head. “That’s what I meant. No motor, and only one oar. Take hours to paddle it back. He’d have plenty of time to get his rifle and wait for us.”

She stared. “You think he would?”

“That’s just it. We don’t know. But paddling down that channel in the open would be the hard way to find out. We stick to the timber.”

“It’s three miles,” she said doubtfully. “And we have to get across the bayou down there.”

“I know. But there’s no other way.”

She lit two cigarettes and handed him one. “You have to rest a minute before we start.”

“All right,” he said reluctantly. He was goaded with a wild impatience to be gone, but he was still weak. They could still get down to the ship channel by dark, he told himself. They had to.

She was watching him quietly, with something expectant in her eyes. “Pete, do you really know why Robert Counsel came back?”

He took a deep drag on the cigarette, dreading part of what he had to tell her. “Yes,” he said. “Counsel came back after something out there in the ship channel. Something he brought from Italy.”

She was kneeling in front of him. “What?” she asked softly.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “We’ve got to find out. But I began to see it when Easter told me when and where he heard those shots. It’s all there now. In the first place, Counsel wouldn’t change his reservations and fly

back from Italy with Mrs. Conway. She couldn't understand that, but I think I do now. He was bringing back something that could only be brought in on a ship. Remember what that long-winded pilot said about those splashes he heard? He couldn't remember the name of the ship, but it was the same line, the Silver Line, and it has to be the one Counsel was on.

"And then there's the dredge. That's the tip-off. It was something Counsel read in the Waynesport paper, remember, that made him come back. I've been going through the paper and beating my brains out for days, trying to figure out what it was. And now I've got it. It was that little blurb saying contracts had been let to begin dredging the channel. You see? Whatever he had thrown overboard was still there, and if he didn't come back and get it the dredge would pick it up and carry it out to sea."

"But," she whispered, puzzled, "why did he wait so long? Why didn't he come back and pick it up after the ship docked, assuming it was contraband he couldn't take through customs?"

He hesitated, hating to tell her. "Remember what the pilot said, Pat? There were two of those splashes. And the second one was right there above the old Counsel landing, where the cabin cruiser exploded. And remember the explosion came from inside the boat. Right there's where you run up against the cold-blooded genius of Robert Counsel. All the men who were in that thing with him were supposed to go pick up that second thing he threw overboard. And I think I've got it now. One of them was too smart, and didn't. Counsel had to run."

He could see the awful unhappiness in her face. But she's suspected it all along, he thought, taking her hand in his. She knew it even if she didn't want to admit it. Her brother and Morton were mixed up in those Army thefts along with Counsel.

"But," she said softly, "who was the other one? The one who didn't go out to pick it up?"

"Griffin," he said simply. "It was Griffin who killed Counsel and then killed Mac."

She gasped, and looked at him incredulously. "But—I don't see, Pete . . . How do you know it's Griffin?"

"Remember how he cut that pilot off with some phony excuse about listening to the motor? You see, Griffin didn't know until then where the real drop had been thrown overboard. He realized just at that moment what

the pilot had been talking about, and he shut him up before we could get wise. The next thing Captain Shevlin was about to say was that the night all this happened was the same night that explosion took place. You see it now, Pat?"

"Yes," she said, her voice low and choked with emotion. "We've got to get word to the police."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Pat. We can't prove a word of it."

"What are we going to do?"

He caught the improvised crutch and pulled himself upright, white-faced with pain. "We've got to get down to that Number Fourteen buoy by the time it's dark. If it is Griffin, he'll be there."

"But hadn't we better get the police too?"

"No. They might scare him off." He paused; then went on softly. "I want Griffin, Pat. The police can have him after I get through with him."

It was dusk when they came out at last on the main arm of the bayou, near the camp, and he sank down, exhausted and drenched with sweat. It had been agonizing, and maddeningly slow, with long stops to rest every two or three hundred yards. The crutch kept sticking into the ground, and he had had to cut off his trouser legs and bind them around the end of it to form a cushion. The ankle throbbed with pain whenever he stood upright, even with no weight on it. And every weary step of it had been goaded by the refrain going around in his head. We'll be too late. We'll be too late.

They squatted down now in the screen of shrubbery and looked out across the bayou in the deepening twilight. "We still have to get across," she whispered.

"I have to get across," he corrected. "You wait here, Pat."

"But how are you going to do it? If you leave your crutch here you won't be able to walk when you get over there."

"I'm going to take it," he replied. He stood up again and limped painfully along the bank. In a moment he found what he sought, a piece of dried-out timber left by the high water of some long-past flood. Getting down onto his hands and knees, he rolled and tugged it into the water. She helped him.

"Let me go, Pete," she begged.

"No," he said shortly. He was working fast now. He sat down on the edge of the bank, placed the crutch lengthwise along the piece of driftwood,

took off his shoes, tied the laces together, and set them across it. Then he removed his belt, strapped it around the whole thing, and fastened his wrist watch on the belt.

It was growing dark now. Time was running out. He could scarcely see her in the dense shadow along the shore. Taking the gun out of the waistband of his trousers, he handed it to her.

“Wait for me right here,” he said quietly. “Sit still, and don’t smoke. When somebody comes along in a boat it’ll probably be me, but don’t believe it until you hear me speak and recognize my voice. If Easter shows up, don’t try to bluff him with this gun. Shoot him.”

He moved slowly, kicking with only one foot, but he could stop and rest by holding onto the timber. When he climbed out on the other side he could not get his left shoe back on because of the swelling and pain in his ankle. He threw it away and began groping his way along the bank. It was black under the trees. He bumped into them and floundered in vines and underbrush. Several times he banged the ankle, and cursed the sickening pain.

Griffin would be there now. He had an insane desire to throw the crutch away and try to run. If Griffin found what he sought, and got away, they’d never prove a thing. There was no evidence except whatever it was lying there on the bottom of the channel. He lost track of time; there was no knowing how long it was before he began to see the lights of the store and restaurant ahead.

He kept on along the bank, coming in behind the cabins. There was no one around as he hobbled onto the float and felt his way along toward the skiffs. He groped around in three of them before he found one with oars. Getting in was awkward; he had to crawl off the dock onto the seat on his hands and knees. His head was aching again. When he was sitting up on the seat at last with his legs stretched out, the ankle didn’t hurt so badly. He picked up the oars and shoved away from the landing.

A low overcast was pushing in from the Gulf, blotting out the stars. He could just make out the dark loom of the timber on both sides of him as he swung the oars with long, hard strokes. When he had rounded the bend and passed the branching channel he pulled in close to shore and began calling her name softly.

“Here, Pete,” she said, quite near. He came up against the bank stern first. She stepped in and sat down, and gingerly handed him the gun.

“I’ll drop you off at the boat landing,” he said. “And go on out under that first highway bridge, by the Counselor.”

“No,” she said flatly. “I’m going with you.”

“You can’t. It may be dangerous.”

“Please, Pete,” she whispered. “Can’t you understand? I have to go. I can’t let you do it alone. We’re in this together.”

Delay was agony. Time ran past them while they talked. Against his better judgment he relented. “O.K., Pat,” he said. He dug in the oars and went straight up the bayou past the old camp ground. Sweat ran down his naked shoulders. He felt his way around the bend and under the highway bridge. A few cars slipped past on the highway. He looked away from the lights to avoid cutting down his vision even more. Patricia was quiet in the stern seat, and he could see only the pale blur of her face. It was intensely still except for the creak of the oarlocks.

Maybe I’m wrong, he thought. Maybe Counsel had already found it and hauled it up before Griffin shot him. But, no. There hadn’t been time. Easter had said it was just after dark when he heard the shots. Griffin had been waiting for him. Shooting him before Counsel could lead him to the place where it had been thrown overboard was stupid of Griffin, but it almost had to be that way.

That was the thing that had made it so nearly impossible to figure out. One man had shot Counsel and another had buried him, and neither knew about the other. Counsel had probably fallen out of his boat and had swum ashore to try to get back to his car and a doctor, and Griffin didn’t know he was dead until he had already approached McHugh. He thought Mac was working for Counsel until it was too late and he’d already exposed himself. He’d killed Mac, and then tried to kill Mrs. Conway because he knew that if she’d put one man on the trail there’d be others unless he stopped her.

They were nearing the ship channel. “Not a sound from now on, Pat,” he whispered. “Don’t talk, and don’t move around. If he’s down here he’ll be working without lights and we’ve got to get close enough to board him.”

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?” she pleaded.

He thought of everything that depended on them now. If they failed . . . He pushed the thought of failure out of his mind and felt the hard weight of

the gun against his waist. "I'll be careful," he said grimly.

They were out in the ship channel now and he could see the lighted buoy winking on and off below them. Swinging wide, against the opposite shore, they slipped past in the impenetrable darkness beyond the range of its flashes. He rowed softly now, guarding against every sound.

When they were a hundred yards or more beyond the light he stopped pulling on the oars and held his breath to listen. There was no sound except an occasional faint rumble from the dredge working below them. The darkness of the water and of the sky seemed to run together, as if they were suspended in a black void and cut off from all contact with the world except the intermittent flashing of the buoy just visible out of the corner of his eye.

He felt cold and hollow inside. There was nothing here, no one at all. He'd been wrong, or they were too late. Griffin would have been here as soon as darkness fell, dragging for whatever it was that was so valuable and had cost so many lives. They had missed him. Or, he thought, there never was anything. I added it up wrong. It was a pipe dream.

The boat was swinging a little. They were drifting on the sluggish current, and the buoy light was coming around in front of his eyes. He started to swing his head to keep from looking at it; then he stopped, feeling the quick surge of excitement along his nerves.

Something had blocked the light. And there it was again. Somewhere between them and the buoy another boat was drifting, as silently as their own. He leaned forward and tapped Patricia on the knee, uttering no sound. Catching her hand, he gestured toward the buoy, and could feel her grow tense as she caught his meaning. He heard her sharp intake of breath. She had seen the boat too.

He dipped the oars, very softly, and stopped the boat's swinging. They lay astern toward the buoy as he backed water on them again and, eased it up against the current. Below them, in salt water, the tide was ebbing and water was running slowly out of the channel. If the other boat was Griffin's, he was letting it drift on the current as he dragged for what he sought.

Easy, he thought; take it easy. The slightest noise now would ruin it all. He pushed on the oars again. They were drawing nearer. He could see a pale blur ahead of them now and knew it was the cabin cruiser with its new white paint.

Then he stopped, listening. They were some fifteen yards from the larger boat now and he was conscious of a peculiar rasping sound and a trickle of water. It puzzled him for an instant; then he knew what it was. A line was being hauled in over the stern of the cruiser, coming up out of the water and dripping a little as it sawed across the transom. The sound stopped, and was replaced by another, a heavy thud as something was lifted and deposited in the bottom of the cockpit. Reno pushed hard at the oars. He knew Griffin had found what he was dragging for. In another instant he would press the starter and be gone.

They were closing—ten yards, five. Reno swung the skiff to come up alongside where he could reach the cockpit. His heart was hammering with excitement. He shipped the oars, quickly, silently, and prepared to grab as the cruiser loomed above them. Then haste was their undoing. He came up off the seat, forgetting the numb and useless ankle, and lost his balance. He fell to his knees in the bottom of the skiff, and the gun clattered against the wooden grating.

Glaring and pitiless light broke over them, and a jocular voice hailed them from behind it.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the stump-jumper navy,” the voice said. “Relax, boys and girls, and just hold that pose.”

## Eighteen

Patricia gasped. Reno tried to sit up, his hand involuntarily reaching for the gun in front of him; then he froze. It was hopeless; he could see nothing at all except that malevolent light.

“Friends,” Griffin’s amused voice continued, “on your right you’re looking into the wrong end of a Luger, so let’s don’t have any old college try. Just maintain the attitude, Reno. And, honey, you can reach over and take that roscoe in your warm little hand and drop it over the side.”

She stared at Reno helplessly. “Go ahead,” he said quietly. She lifted it from the grating and let it fall into the water.

The end of a line fell across the boat. “Come alongside,” Griffin said. Reno stared wickedly at the light for an instant; then he thought of Patricia. He caught the line and pulled. The skiff bumped against the side of the cruiser.

“All right, get aboard,” Griffin said crisply. “We haven’t got all night.”

Patricia climbed onto the stern. Reno made it with difficulty, the ankle throbbing. They still stood in the glare of the light, which had retreated to the forward end of the cockpit.

“Now,” Griffin went on, the disembodied voice issuing from somewhere behind the light, “tip that skiff up. Let it fill with water, then turn it upside down.” The voice chuckled. “Let ‘em drag for you down here. It’ll keep ‘em happy.”

Reno turned and faced the light, his face savage. “Why the delay? Why not there in the skiff, the way you did Counsel? Or in the back of the head, like McHugh?”

Griffin laughed easily. “Friend Robert got a little trigger-happy. And he thought I wouldn’t shoot because I still didn’t know where the stuff was. Only time I ever knew Marse Bob to make a bum decision.” He paused, then went on briskly. “But get with it. Dump that boat. I picked you up

because I can use you, but if you want to commit suicide your lady friend can do the job.”

Reno stared with cold deadliness; then he sat down on the stern. He pushed down on the edge of the skiff until it began to fill with water. When it was awash he caught the other edge and heaved it over.

He faced the light again. “What job?” he asked.

“Just a minute, pal. Got to get these running lights on.”

A switch clicked. In a moment the powerful light went out, but it was replaced at the same instant with a lesser one, still shining in Reno’s eyes.

“Don’t get any happy ideas,” Griffin warned. “The Luger’s still looking at you. And remember, if I have to kill you, Pat will do.”

“Do what?” she asked. Her voice was calm now. She sat down in the stern beside Reno. “I won’t do anything.”

“Come now, honey.” Griffin chuckled. “That’s an obstructionist attitude. Don’t puzzles fascinate you?”

“What do you mean?” she asked coldly.

“Look down at your feet.”

The light dipped a little and they looked down. In the desperate bitterness of defeat Reno had forgotten the thing Griffin had been dragging for, but now it came back to him and he stared, completely mystified. This was what had caused the death of Mac, and of Counsel and Pat’s brother and a man named Charles Morton—but what was it?

It lay on the flooring of the cockpit still wet and plastered here and there with the black silt of the channel bottom, and for an instant he could make nothing of it except a welter of very thin, flexible steel cable. Then he began to see what it was. There were two net pouches, or bags made of this flexible wire and they were tied together by a short length of it, possibly fifteen or twenty feet. But it was the two objects in their respective pouches that made his eyes narrow in wonder. They were about the size and shape of small watermelons, and had a metallic sheen as if they were covered with lead.

“What’s in those things?” Patricia asked defiantly.

“A very interesting question, honey,” Griffin replied. “And that’s exactly why I had to put on a larger staff. You ever hear the old wheeze about the electrician who told his helper to take hold of a wire? And when the poor joker did, he says, ‘All right. Mark it. But don’t touch the other one. It’s got

20,000 volts in it.' You see, you just got to have help to figure out things like that."

"You mean you don't know?" she demanded.

"Well, let's put it this way. It's a little question of trying to outguess our friend Robert. You might say I know what's in there, but I'm a little hazy as to what else there might be, and how it's distributed—" He broke off, and gestured with the flashlight. "But never mind. We'll go into that later. Right now we've got to get out of this channel. This way, friends."

He opened the door going forward. A switch clicked, and the engine compartment was flooded with light. Griffin backed into the other corner of the cockpit.

"All the way forward, men," he ordered. "Into that locker in the bow."

Patricia glanced coldly in the direction of the flashlight and entered the engine compartment. Reno followed her, limping awkwardly and supporting himself by holding onto anything he could reach. Bent over, they went past the idle engine and into the locker. It was no more than a triangular cubbyhole right in the prow of the boat, half filled with coils of line and paint pots, with no room to stand upright. They sat down on the deck, squeezed together, with their backs against a sloping outboard bulkhead.

Griffin appeared in the engine compartment behind them. "Sleep tight," he said. "Big day as soon as it's light." He closed the door, and they were in total darkness. Reno heard the rattle of a hasp; then a padlock clicked shut.

Griffin rapped on the door. "Lot of turps and paint-thinner in there," he said, "so think it over before you try to smoke."

Neither of them gave him any reply. They heard his footsteps going back toward the cockpit. Reno realized that she was shaking violently. She was making no sound, but he knew how desperately she was fighting to keep her nerves from breaking.

He put his arms about her and pulled her head against his chest, holding her very tightly. With his face softly brushing her curls, he whispered, "Pat, I'm sorry. I should have made you stay."

She drew in a shaky breath. "And let you face it alone? I'm all right, Pete. I'm not much afraid, with you here."

"We'll be all right," he said, trying to make it sound convincing. "Griffin can't get way with it."

The starter growled, and in a moment the noise of the engine filled the compartment. The boat vibrated, gathering speed. I had him, Reno thought; I had it made, and still I lost it.

"Pete," she asked softly, "what did he mean about outguessing Robert Counsel? And why doesn't he know what's in those things?"

"I'm not sure yet," he said, lying. He was beginning to see why, and thinking about it gave him a chill.

But what were the lead containers supposed to have in them, to make them worth all the lives they had cost so far? He knew what Griffin suspected, and why the redhead had abducted them instead of killing them on the spot, but he still couldn't guess what made the things so valuable. Griffin's probably right, too, he thought; he's no fool. He outguessed Robert Counsel before, and let Pat's brother and Morton get blown to hell while he played it safe. It was a savage game of double-cross and double-double-cross and maybe Robert Counsel would still have the last laugh.

But that wasn't important now. The only thing in the world that mattered now was getting out of here before it was too late. Unless they could stop Griffin, every minute was bringing them nearer death. The redhead couldn't turn back now, even if he wished; he had to kill them, as he had killed McHugh. And it would mean the end for Vickie. With them would vanish forever any evidence against Griffin. It swept over him all at once, and he fought for calmness. If he lost his head now they had no chance at all. Griffin would hear it and be waiting with the gun. They had to do it silently. Maybe with his knife he could cut out the section of the door that held the hasp.

He opened the knife, and ran the blade along the crack until he felt it strike the hasp. Marking it with a finger, he began whittling. It was impossible to see anything at all. There was no way to tell whether he was even cutting in the same place half the time. He hacked his fingers. The knife blade broke off at the point. He kept on, sweating in the heat, and hurrying.

Once the boat appeared to come up against a dock for a few minutes, but the engine continued to idle and they could not be sure whether Griffin was still aboard. Then they were moving again.

They lost all track of time. That blade of the knife finally snapped off altogether, and he switched to the small one. It lasted only a few minutes,

and when it broke off next to the handle he wanted to put his head down in his hands. He sat still then.

After a while the engine throttled down until they had bare steerageway, and ran that way for a long time. Once or twice Reno thought he heard branches scrape along the hull. They must be up in the bayous, far off the ship channel.

Then, finally, the engine stopped. They bumped gently against something, and he heard footsteps over their heads. Griffin was tying up. They heard him moving around aft for a while; then there was silence except for the sound of frogs and once or twice an owl hooting. Reno held Patricia in his arms and waited out the hours until daylight. Once she slept for a while, fitfully, making little whimpering sounds that stirred the hatred inside him.

\* \* \*

He sat up, listening. Griffin was unsnapping the padlock. The door swung open and he motioned with the gun. It was dawn now, and light was pouring into the engine compartment.

Griffin chuckled. "Say, you're a rugged-looking character, with that blood all over your head. I'd borrow your face for Halloween, if you were still going to be around." Reno looked hungrily at the gun. "One of us won't be."

"Pal, you're so right. Now, let's get aft, shall we?" They went single file back to the cockpit, Reno hobbling as best he could, Patricia white-faced and ignoring Griffin with icy contempt, and the latter bringing up the rear with the gun and humming under his breath. Reno looked around, blinking at the light. It was a lovely setting. The cruiser was tied up at a rotting old dock on a narrow arm of the bayou. Big trees hung out over the water except at the landward end of the dock itself. There had been a building there at one time, but it had burned down and nothing remained except the chimney and fireplace. Beyond it lay an open field of several acres, brown with dead grass.

"Robert Counsel's so-called fishing lodge, or what's left of it," Griffin said behind them: "Now. Sit down, both of you."

He sat down himself on the leather seat across the cockpit from them, stretched out his legs, and lit a cigarette. The gun lay carelessly in his lap; but his eyes watched Reno. He grinned at them, and nodded his head toward the after end of the cockpit. "Beauties, eh?" he asked.

The steel cable and mesh bags had been thrown away, and the two lead watermelons lay side by side. The mud had been washed from them and they had a smooth, fat, and somehow deadly look in the early light. They're a little like bombs without fins, Reno thought. Then he turned to look at Griffin.

"They've killed four men," he said softly.

"Right." Griffin took a drag on the cigarette. "That is, if you count McHugh. He was more or less a by-product."

The yearning to kill was very strong inside him now. He could feel the crazy foaming of it, and tried to reason with himself. The thing to do was wait, and play it out. There'd always be that one desperate lunge at the end, if everything else failed.

"What's in them?" he asked, his face showing nothing.

Patricia was leaning forward, staring with fascination, while they waited for Griffin to answer. Reno was conscious of the same suspense. Here was the thing they had trailed so long; the thing that had killed Mac, and had set off this chain reaction of death and disaster. And in the end it was two fat, lead-sheathed, watermelon-shaped objects lying harmlessly in the cockpit of a boat.

Griffin pushed the white cap back on his head and shrugged. "Somewhere around a quarter million dollars and/or enough high explosive to blow us all to hell and halfway back."

Reno slowly expelled his breath. "Quarter million dollars worth of what?"

"Heroin. The pure McCoy. Uncut. And not grains, or ounces, but pounds of it. Sweet, huh?"

Reno leaned back against his seat. "So that's why they never could find out what he did with the money? Counsel, I mean. When they court-martialed him."

Griffin eyed him speculatively. "So you found out about that?" Then he went on. "That's right. Robert was buying dope and stashing it away in a hiding place he had. Packed it in cans and evacuated the air. He had a

vacuum pump. We weren't sure how long it'd be before we could come back after it, or how much it deteriorated with age."

"But why dope?"

Griffin shook his head, grinning. "Robert. You have to understand him. He was a genius, with a nasty sense of humor, and a flair for embroidering a theme. He took a dim view of any kind of authority, and resented being shoved into the military. So what could be better than stealing from the U.S. Army and using their money to buy dope to smuggle in? The Army was financing his operations against the Narcotics Bureau. And then there was the money, too. Tremendous profit this way."

"But none of the rest of you knew where he had it hidden?"

"Yes. We did. But he moved it on us. The night before he was arrested. There'd been an argument with Morton and Devers, and. He thought they had squealed on him, or were about to."

Reno nodded, his eyes harsh. "So when Counsel got out of prison and went back to Italy after the stuff, Morton and Devers went out to pick it up out of the channel but you didn't go. Why?"

Griffin smiled. "Little matter of understanding friend Robert. I began to smell a rat. You see, we didn't tell them. After all, why split it four ways? But the night the Silver Cape arrived off the bar, they showed up in my office down there on the dock. They'd found out all about it.

"At first they were going to rough me up for double-crossing them, but they cooled down after a while and I managed to find out now they'd got wind of it. That's when I wised up. It seems Robert had run into an old girl friend of Carl Devers in Italy and had started shooting off his mouth, and she had written Carl all about it. And the funny thing was, he also ran into an old flame of Chappie Morton, and told her, too. Just chummy, you see." Griffin broke off and grinned at them. "You begin to get it now?"

Reno felt a chill along his back. So that was the kind of mind they'd been up against. He nodded.

"Well, it was simple, then," Griffin went on. "Just elementary stuff. I played it real yokel and let them throw down on me with that silly Italian gun they had. They tied me up and locked me in the office, and shoved off with the boat. And in just about an hour I heard it let go, like a refinery blowing up, and knew I'd been right. So I untied myself and called the

Sheriff and Coast Guard and reported the boat stolen. Then I warmed up one of the tugs and pulled their car off into the channel.”

Reno glanced sidewise at Patricia. She was pale, and her eyes were sick with horror. He reached for her hand and held it. There was nothing else he could do.

Griffin smiled. “So now you see the enchanting prospect. There are two of these lead pigs, and either one of them is big enough to hold the stuff. Or isn’t it? Can’t you just hear the bastard laughing? He was going to get all three of us with that other one, but just in case he didn’t— Catch on, pal?”

“Right,” Reno said coldly. “But how do you think you’re going to make me open them?”

Griffin smiled again.. “That’s easy. Your lady friend here. You’ll have one of the pigs, and we’ll have one. If you don’t open yours within ten minutes, we’ll dig into the other. A quarter million’s a lot of money, and nobody lives forever.” He broke off and winked at “Patricia. “We’re not chicken, are we, honey?”

## Nineteen

Griffin stopped talking. He picked up the gun from his lap and threw the cigarette overboard. "All right, Reno," he said. "Hustle those two pigs up on the bank."

Patricia Devers stood up. Her face was white, but she stood very tall and straight and her eyes were blazing. "No!" she said. "You can't make him do it. You coldblooded murderer, if you're so brave, we'll open them. You and I—" Reno saw her sway a little. She was very near the breaking point.

Griffin smiled tightly. "Better keep your lady friend quiet, before she gets a mouthful of gun. He gestured with the Luger. "Now wrestle those pigs."

It took ten minutes or more, hobbling on his sprained ankle. He lifted them onto the dock one at a time and rolled them to the bank. Near the ashes where the lodge had been stood a large oak, and beyond it lay the open field. A shallow foxhole had been scooped in the ground under the tree, the dirt thrown up at the end toward the field. Across the mound of earth lay a telescope on a short-legged tripod. Reno looked at it. Smart, he thought.

The two lead containers lay side by side near the foxhole. Reno knelt in front of them. Griffin stood ten feet away with the gun. Never any nearer, Reno observed coldly; he's watching me every minute.

"That's a thirty-power spotting scope," Griffin said. "I went back and got it last night. It's trained on that big stump out there in the field, the one straight ahead about fifty yards. Take your pig out there and put it on the stump, and open it, facing this way. I'll be able to see every move you make, as if you were about five feet away. If it blows, I'll know what not to do when I open this."

"The heroic Mr. Griffin," Patricia said contemptuously.

"Shut up," Griffin said idly.

She's trying to get him to swing at her with that gun, Reno thought, to give me a chance to take him. But he knows it.

Griffin went on, speaking to Reno. "You can't run, with that ankle. If you try, I'll shoot you. You'll have ten minutes, from the time you get the pig on the stump. Ready?"

"You in a hurry?" Reno asked thinly.

"I said you could have your choice of pigs." The redhead grinned, his eyes shining wickedly. "If you can tell one from the other, take a good, long look."

Patricia was standing by the tree, silently watching. Reno stared down at the lead containers. Wasn't it better to stand up and walk to Griffin, taking the whole clip if he had to in order to get his hands on him? Maybe he could live long enough to do it. Patricia would live. And Vickie could go free. Then he knew it wouldn't work; Griffin was too cool for that. At least one of the shots would be through the head, or the heart, and he'd never reach him. He returned to his study of the containers. How did you understand Counsel? Could you? Could anybody? There were three ways it could be, and two of them meant instant death. There could be heroin in both of them; there could be heroin in one and explosive in the other; or there could be both in each one. The detonating triggers would be right under the surface, set to blow at the slightest disturbance of the lead sheath; only Counsel would know how to disarm it, and he was dead. He thought of Carl Devers and Morton, out there in the ship channel at night, holding a flashlight perhaps, slicing into the lead eagerly. . . .

It was deadly silent now. He thought of something that even Griffin did not know. All the time Counsel had been in San Francisco he had bought the Waynesport paper every day, watching it for something. Just for a notice about the dredge? Or had he been checking to be sure Griffin hadn't found these things? If he had, it meant he'd know the instant they were found and opened; that they, were both loaded with explosive in addition to the dope.

There was one thing, however, that maybe neither Counsel nor Griffin had thought of. It was a long chance, but it was better than none at all. He continued to examine the objects before him. Minutes ticked by, and he felt the sun warming his back. He leaned forward, running his finger along the surface and the seams like a near-sighted man reading. He turned first one and then the other, examining every inch. At last he selected one.

He straightened up on his knees. "Pitch me your knife," he said, his voice sounding far away and strange in the silence. "I'm ready."

Patricia ran across and "fell to her knees in front of him. Her arms were about his neck, and he saw the brown eyes were wet with tears.

"No!" she begged. "No, Pete! Don't."

"There's no other way," he said. He brought his hands up and placed one on each side of her face, just looking at her.

"I can't stand it," she whispered.

Slowly he bent his face down and kissed her, his love for her tearing at him, and wanting to hold her like that forever. Then he gently removed his hands and straightened up. She remained on her knees, her eyes closed and tears squeezing out from under the lashes. Her lips moved without sound.

"Next week we'll try East Lynne," Griffin said. "Now if we'll pull our feet out of the schmaltz bucket and—"

Reno turned and stared at him. "The knife," he said, his voice brittle as ice.

Griffin tossed it. Reno picked it up, took the lead pig under his other arm, and walked straight out across the field, contemptuously ignoring the agony of his ankle. He placed his burden on the flat top of the stump and went around behind it, facing back the way he had come.

Griffin was behind the pile of earth, watching through the spotting scope. Patricia remained where she had been, on her knees in the open, her face slightly lifted.

"Get her down," Reno said. "Or behind that tree."

"I mentioned that," Griffin called back, "but she says she's praying. Religious freedom, you know; dealer's choice. But never mind her. Get with it, chum."

Then Patricia crumpled and lay flat. Reno looked away from her and opened the knife. He turned the lead container slightly, placing it so one of the seams ran directly along the top. He could feel the sun on his head, turning hot now. Sweat ran down his face. The mockingbird sang again somewhere in the trees beyond the field, and he heard the buzz of a locust in the dry, still air.

He forced everything else from his mind. The world narrowed to this smooth, lead-covered object in front of him and he placed the point of the knife near the seam and pressed. Slowly he drew it along, parallel to the

seam, from one end to the other. It left a shallow cut. Wiping the sweat from his face, he moved the knife back to the starting point and deepened the slash.

He made an identical cut along the other side of the seam. Then he turned the knife and cut directly across the seam in the center, from one slash to the other. He brought the knife back, ready to cut again. This one will do it, he thought, pressing the knife deeper into the lead. He was scarcely breathing now.

He felt the knife go through. Gently prying with the blade as a lever, he opened the hole, watching tensely. He breathed again, letting air escape with a long, shuddering sigh. All right, he thought; just keep watching through your damned telescope and you'll learn what not to do.

Lead will tear if grooved deeply enough. Working very slowly now and with infinite care, he pulled free and lifted the narrow strip between the grooves he had cut. It came up inch by gradual inch, as he held it pressed tightly with his left hand.

"You hit one of 'em?" Griffin called.

Reno made no reply. He studied the situation for a moment; then, slowly shifting his body around, he lay across the container so his left arm pressed down on the strip he had just torn up and pushed back. Holding it there, he began slowly cutting loose and lifting, in the same manner, the other half of the strip beyond the center cut, watching beneath it as he lifted. Then, the same distance from the center as the other one, he made a quick movement with his hand, pressed the strip down, and held it. He was immobilized now, lying across it and pressing down in two places at once, his face set in harsh lines.

"What is it?" Griffin called out.

"Two of them. I've got 'em, but I can't move now."

"What's in it? Can you see?"

"It's divided in the middle. Two canvas bags. One of 'em feels like little milk cans, and the other one's sticks. Dynamite."

Griffin stood up. He walked out a few steps. "Can you get at the wires?"

Reno shook his head. Sweat ran down into his eyes and made them sting. "Not yet. It'll take another cut. What's the matter? You afraid, or doesn't that quarter of a million look as big now?"

Patricia had risen to her knees and was staring in horror. Griffin walked toward the stump. He stopped ten feet away, still holding the gun ready in his hand.

“Then they’re both booby-trapped,” he said. “Unless you’re lying.”

Reno stared at him coldly. “All right, maybe I’m lying. But don’t use that gun, because if you shoot me I’ll fall off these triggers. You’re close enough now to get it. And don’t try to move back, or I’ll let ‘em go. Now, do you want to hold one of them so I can disarm it, or not?”

Griffin remained rooted, watching. “Nuts,” he said. “You wouldn’t let ‘em go.”

Reno shifted uncomfortably, but kept his left forearm and right hand pressed against the two points on the strips, leaning over a little. “Pat,” he called out, raising his voice. “Get down on the ground. And listen. If this thing blows now, Griffin goes with it. Leave the other one right where it is, and go after the Sheriff. Warn ‘em they’ll have to borrow a bomb-disposal man from the Navy to get it apart. There’ll be enough evidence there to back up your story, so Vickie’ll be in the clear—” He stopped, almost holding his breath in suspense. Griffin had stepped forward.

Reno gestured with his head. “Right there. Put your hand down on. The lead, near the outer end, and slide it on as I slide mine off.”

Griffin already had his left hand on the lead surface and was beginning to slide it when his eyes suddenly widened. He cursed, and started to bring the gun up. Reno let go the lead container with both hands and grabbed him. He heard Patricia scream.

He had Griffin’s right arm with both hands. He twisted brutally, and the gun fell. It hit the stump, bounced, and fell to the ground between them. He caught the red head’s shirt collar with his left hand and pulled him forward as he swung the right. It landed with a sickening impact, and Griffin’s knees sagged.

The crazy, black desire to kill was driving him now. Mac was in his mind, and Vickie, as he pulled himself across the stump and crashed to the ground on top of the other man. The lead container rolled off and came to rest beside them as he found Griffin’s throat with his hands and began closing them, slowly, tighter and tighter. . . .

Her arms were around his face, smothering him, and she was screaming. It seemed to take a long time for what she was saying to penetrate to him

through the roaring of the black wind that went on and on, but at last he understood and released the still living man beneath him. He tried to sit up. She fell across him, with her arms about his neck.

\* \* \*

They were ready to go. Griffin, his hands and feet bound, had been shoved into the small locker and the padlock snapped shut. The two lead containers lay in the after part of the cockpit out of the way. Reno and Patricia sat in the leather seat along one side, smoking a cigarette before they cast off.

"I'm sorry, Pat," he said gently. "About your brother, I mean. I kept hoping there might be some other answer."

"It'll be all right," she said. "I faced it a long time ago, and the worst part is already over." She was silent for a moment, staring moodily out across the channel. Then she went on, "But let's not think about it any more. Think of Vickie, and how she'll feel a few hours from now. There won't be any question at all now, will there?"

"No. Even if Griffin won't talk, we've got enough evidence to get her out of there tonight."

She shuddered involuntarily and shook her head. "I'll have nightmares the rest of my life. How could you ever cut into that awful thing?"

He took her in his arms and kissed her, and then grinned. "The one I was working on was harmless enough," he said. "And I think the other one may be, too, but I'm not going to open it to see. The police can take over, as far as I'm concerned."

"But they were booby traps, weren't they? I mean, one end filled with those cans of heroin and the other with explosive?"

"That's right. But there was something Griffin and Counsel both forgot about."

She raised her head and looked at him. "What was that?"

"Water pressure. It's tough stuff to fool with after you get down past thirty feet. And to build something that'll stay water tight for months at that depth, you've almost got to test it under pressure. It turned out I was right. I knew it, as soon as I got the knife through it the first time. Water oozed out: There was a tiny flaw in the seam, and the thing was full of water before it had been down there a day."

“And that killed the explosive?”

He shook his head. “Not the explosive. The detonating circuit. At that pressure, water would seep into the battery in no time, and destroy it. Griffin knew it too, but he found out too late. He was already within grabbing distance before he saw the water and knew I’d been leaning over it that way to hide it from him.”

She stared at him admiringly. “You’re amazing.”

“And you’re very beautiful.”

She smiled. “Shall we go around again? Or get started?”

He looked out along the bayou leading back toward the south and east where the highway and the camp should be, and Vickie, and then San Francisco, and all the time ahead. Then he turned back to the very large and very lovely brown eyes looking up at him adoringly.

He kissed her.

“You name it, Skipper,” he said.

THE END

